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MONASH University

Hannah Arendt and Council Democracy

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
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Abstract

This thesis examines Hannah Arendt's argument for a council democracy and its relevance for contemporary democratic practices. References to the councils in Arendt's work are often ignored or dismissed by her interpreters as a utopian commitment. Against the tendency to neglect this aspect of her thought, I argue that the councils play a crucial role in her work as the institutional embodiment of her principle of political freedom. Tracing the development of the council concept in Arendt's thought, I offer a significant reinterpretation of her political theory as situated within the radical democratic tradition of Rosa Luxemburg. I contend that Arendt's key contribution to democratic theory is her championing of a federal system of participatory and empowered councils as the central political institutions of a council republic.

Arendt's argument for a council democracy draws from historical examples of councils from the French Revolution to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. However, Arendt mischaracterises the nature of the councils and the intentions of council delegates. She inserts them in the framework of her own political categories and disregards the delegates' socialist ideology and socio-economic concerns. Arendt's distortion of the councils gives rise to the need for a historical re-examination of their political practices. I return to the political struggles of the post-First World War council movements in Germany and Russia in order to place the councils in historical perspective and challenge the biases of Arendt's account. My analysis reveals that the councils were concerned with both political and economic affairs. I revise Arendt's depiction in arguing that the councils were transformative organs of democratisation that sought to introduce democratic conditions into all spheres of social organisation.

Situating the councils in relation to contemporary democratic practices, my principal argument is that they offer a critical perspective on the limits of current liberal democratic regimes. Although the councils do not present a model that could be replicated today, council delegates engaged in significant political practices that are instructive for current attempts at political transformation. In particular, they reveal the insufficiencies of electoral institutions for enabling widespread political participation and holding elites accountable. I argue that the historical significance of the councils is their exemplary role as institutions through which working-class forces organised to restrain elites, dismantle hierarchical systems and equalise power between citizens.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

James Muldoon

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Hannah Arendt and Council Democracy

Hannah Arendt offers one of the most trenchant criticisms of liberal representative democracy, yet one aspect of her critique remains neglected and misunderstood. While her criticisms of the oligarchic structure of political parties and the disempowering effects of representative institutions have been thoroughly addressed, relatively little attention has been dedicated to her argument for a council democracy.¹ References to a council system in Arendt's work are often dismissed by scholars as a naïve political ideal or a hopelessly unrealistic proposal.² They question the strength of her support for the councils and the extent to which her readers should view them as a practical proposal for reform.³ Indeed, Arendt's own ambivalence towards council democracy has added to the doubt and ambiguity. She confessed that she had a certain "romantic sympathy" for this "people's utopia" and doubted whether the system was at all relevant in the American context with its disintegrating cities, loss of civic virtue and dwindling public life.⁴ In spite of these reservations, a re-examination

¹ For a brief selection of the closest studies of the council system in Arendt's work see John Sitton, "Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy," *Polity* (1987) 20 (1), 80–100; Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 254–292; Mike McConkey, "On Arendt's Vision of the European Council Phenomenon: Critique from an Historical Perspective," *Dialectical Anthropology* (1991) 16 (1), 15–31; John Medearis, "Lost or Obscured? How V. I. Lenin, Joseph Schumpeter and Hannah Arendt Misunderstood the Council Movement," *Polity* (2004) 36 (3), 447–476; James Muldoon, "The Lost Treasure of Arendt's Council System," *Critical Horizons* (2011) 12 (3), 396–417; Lisa Disch, "How could Hannah Arendt Glorify the American Revolution and Revile the French? Placing *On Revolution* in the Historiography of the French and American Revolutions," *European Journal of Political Theory* (2011) 10 (3), 350–371; Joel Olson, "The Revolutionary Spirit: Hannah Arendt and the Anarchists of the Spanish Civil War," *Polity* (1997) 29 (4), 461–488; Wolfhart Totschnig, "Arendt's Argument for the Council System: A Defense," *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* (2014) 1 (3), 266–282; Steve Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) 104–126; Shmuel Lederman, "Councils and Revolution: Participatory Democracy in Anarchist Thought and the New Social Movements," *Science & Society* (2015) 79 (2), 243–263.

² Although neglected, they appear at the margins of most major studies of Arendt as a remainder or irreconcilable aspect of her thought. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 232–238; Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) 42, 142–146; Richard Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) 117–118, 134–135; George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Consciences, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983) 118–121, Bikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: New Humanities, 1981) 170–171; John McGowan, *Hannah Arendt: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 81–86; Michael Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1994) 127.

³ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 235.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in Melvyn A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979) 327; Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harvest Books, 1969) 189; Hannah Arendt, "The Impotence of Power," roundtable at Theatre for Ideas in New York, 22 May 1969, Arendt Papers, 014410. Yet at other points Arendt was critical of "realists" who viewed the councils "as though they were a romantic dream" or little more than the "hopelessly romantic yearnings of the people." She chides these observers for having taken "their own bearings from the party system, assuming as a matter of

of Arendt's books, essays and archival material reveals that it plays a crucial role throughout her career: from her earliest writings on Jewish politics to her later political theory of action, freedom and revolutions. Arendt describes the council system as the formation of a federal state composed of a network of councils organised into a pyramidal structure.⁵ Lower councils are territorially based and operate at a grass-roots level from which delegates are elected to sit on progressively higher councils ending in a council parliament. An image of council democracy consistently guided Arendt's thinking and provided her with a benchmark for the possibilities of modern politics. Many of her interpreters are content with highlighting its obvious practical difficulties, but the task of a deeper examination of her enigmatic position on the council system remains. The aim of this thesis is to reconsider the role of council democracy in Hannah Arendt's political thought and to demonstrate its relevance for contemporary democratic practices.

Arendt's interest in the councils was connected to her reflections on the troubled state of liberal representative democracy. Her return to a lost council tradition was set against the failings of the democratic governments of her time, many of which, according to some indications, have since further deteriorated.⁶ Contemporary democratic regimes are plagued by a widening gap between ordinary citizens and the political system. Evidence suggests that many citizens feel increasing dissatisfaction with their politicians and democratic institutions.⁷ Representative institutions are perceived to be facilitating the disempowerment

course that there existed no other alternative for representative government and forgetting conveniently that the downfall of the old regime had been due, among other things, precisely to this system." Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006) 255.

⁵ These councils should be distinguished from current local governments at the municipal level within liberal democracies. As I will demonstrate, they can also be distinguished from the former bureaucratic organs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

⁶ Arendt believed that American democracy was facing a "'credibility gap,' which means that those in power are no longer believed – quite apart from whether one agrees with them or not." Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Pelican Books, 1973) 183. Claims of a "crisis of democracy" go back at least to a report to the Trilateral Commission in 1975. See Michael Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975). The notion of a "democratic deficit" troubling contemporary liberal democracies is of course contested by scholars, but this thesis proceeds on the basis that growing citizen dissatisfaction with democratic governments is evidence of unresolved tensions with current liberal representative democratic regimes. See Jürgen Habermas, "The European Nation-State – Its Achievements and Its Limits. On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship," in Gopal Balakrishnan and Benedict Anderson (eds.), *Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 1995) 281–294; Simon Tormey, *The End of Representative Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

⁷ Although, this evidence is not entirely uniform and varies considerably across countries and regions. Pippa Norris, *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Susan Pharr and Robert D. Putnam, *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Russell Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic*

of citizens by concentrating real decision-making power in closed and inaccessible institutions.⁸ In particular, two inter-related problems have emerged. Firstly, disaffected citizens sense that representative institutions are dominated by a narrow circle of elites that control decision-making, which results in outcomes that are not in the interests of the majority of citizens.⁹ There are only a limited number of accountability measures available to citizens to control these elites, with an increasing number of scholars suggesting that elections provide only a minimal measure of accountability.¹⁰ Secondly, participation in formal political processes has declined across the board in most advanced industrial countries.¹¹ There are few institutionalised spaces in which citizens can engage in meaningful participation in their democracies. Problems of the elite domination of political processes and a dwindling participation of ordinary citizens in politics are part of a broader legitimacy deficit facing democratic regimes. Although belief in democracy as an ideal has risen, the institutions of contemporary democratic regimes are failing to embody many of its central values such as self-government and political freedom.¹² The central political issue to which this thesis responds is the inability of liberal democracy to provide realistic avenues for redressing these criticisms and weaknesses. My contention is that examining Arendt's argument for a council democracy assists us in understanding such deficiencies and exploring possibilities for their reform.

Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸ Theda Skocpol, "Voice and Inequality: The Transformation of American Civic Democracy," *Perspectives on Politics* (2004) 2 (1), 3–20; Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," *Perspectives on Politics* (2014) 12 (3), 564–581.

⁹ For example, 80% of American respondents to a recent global survey considered that their country was "run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." Steven Kull et al., *World Public Opinion on Governance and Democracy* (Washington: PIPA, 2008).

¹⁰ Robert Goodin, *Innovating Democracy: Democratic Theory and Practice after the Deliberative Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, "Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance," *Politics and Society* (2001) 29 (1), 5–41; Mark Warren, "Governance-Driven Democratization," *Critical Policy Analysis* (2009) 3 (1), 3–13.

¹¹ Over the past three decades wealth inequalities have increased and participation in elections, political parties and trade unions have diminished. See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

¹² Dalton, *Democratic Challenges*, *Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, 47; Monica Ferrin, et al., *European's Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy: Topline Results from Round 6 of the European Social Survey* (London: European Social Survey ERIC, 2014); Matt Henn, Mark Weinstein and Sarah Forrest, "Uninterested Youth? Young People's Attitudes towards Party Politics in Britain," *Political Studies* (2005) 53 (3), 556–578. Cf. Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jürgen Habermas, "The Postnational Constellation and the Future of Democracy," in Max Pensky (ed.), *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. M. Pensky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) 58–112.

This thesis pursues two principal investigations. In the first instance, I examine the neglected role of the councils in Arendt's work in order to recast her theory in a more empowered and participatory light as a resource for democratic theory. Acknowledging the importance of the councils offers a new perspective that displaces the view of Arendt as an anti-democratic elitist and connects her to a radical democratic tradition in the line of Rosa Luxemburg. I contend that Arendt's critique of liberal representative democracy is more sustained and thoroughgoing than is widely acknowledged, even by her sympathetic commentators. While her appropriators within democratic theory push liberal democracy to its deliberative, agonistic and radical edges, Arendt champions a federal system of participatory and empowered councils as the central political institutions of a council republic. Rejecting the organising principles of sovereignty and the nation-state, Arendt envisions a decentralised council republic that channels the insurgent political activities of ordinary citizens within a pluralised political space.

The second part of the thesis seeks to reposition and extend Arendt's analysis through a historically focussed examination of the democratic councils. Arendt conceives of the councils from the perspective of her own political categories and analytic distinctions. In so doing, she conceals their socialist ideology and ignores their socio-economic activities. To rectify Arendt's misrepresentations, I return to the historical practices of council delegates in post-First World War Russia and Germany.¹³ Council delegates challenged the institutional structure of liberal democracies, drawing attention to the insufficiencies of national elections for holding elites to account and ensuring widespread participation. Contrasting the actions of the council delegates with our own regimes reveals underappreciated aspects of democratic practices. In particular, the councils direct attention to questions of unequal power relations between citizens and the importance of controlling recalcitrant elites from subverting the public interest to their own private ends. I conceptualise the councils' distinctive mode of democratic action as a resistance to forms of elite domination.

Building on Arendt's work, but modifying the terms of her analysis, I return to the councils as a means of contesting the widely held presumption that current forms of liberal democratic government are the most adequate realisation of democratic principles. I connect the two principal objects of study – Arendt's political theory and the councils as an historical

¹³ I will argue against Arendt that the post-First World War councils were the main historical instance of council democracy and that the previous examples she refers to do not fit the same model.

exemplar – within a theoretical framework in which both elements provide resources that can be brought to bear on contemporary democratic politics.¹⁴ Arendt's institutional sketches of a council system, although instructive, do not provide a coherent and plausible alternative model of democracy. Instead, her writings on democracy reveal some of the limitations of current institutions and offer an alternative set of principles to guide thinking of political transformation. Meanwhile, historical reflections on the political struggles of the councils open our political imagination to a new horizon of possibilities by drawing from debates and events at an important historical juncture before the dominance of current forms of liberal democracy. This thesis interrogates current democratic institutions from the perspective of Arendt's political theory and the political practices of the council movements.

Arendt and Democratic Theory

Arendt's thought is often recognised as posing a challenge to traditional conceptions of democracy. However, any reading of her as a radical democrat must contend with the perception of a deep anti-democratic strain in her thought. Early interpreters cast Arendt as an anti-modernist Grecophile whose work stood in tension with modern democratic values.¹⁵ Sheldon Wolin has written the most damning critique of Arendt as an aristocratic writer who was critical of the central principles of democracy.¹⁶ He argues that as democracy attempts to override the distinction between "the social" and "the political" by redressing socio-economic inequalities through political struggle, it runs counter to the main categories of Arendt's thought.¹⁷ He characterises an Arendtian politics as an agonistic striving for glory between individuals within a political space purified of material interests and socio-economic concerns.¹⁸ While Wolin retains a predominantly negative view of Arendt's elitist attitude towards democracy, Margaret Canovan attempts to gain insight into a tension between the

¹⁴ I return at the end of the introduction to theorise the role historical exemplars can play in political theory.

¹⁵ See Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, 31; Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, xxxix; Hanna Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," in Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman (eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1994) 271–272; Patricia Springborg, "Arendt, Republicanism, and Patriarchalism" *History of Political Thought* (1989) 10 (3), 499–523, 520–521.

¹⁶ Sheldon Wolin, "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political," *Salmagundi* (1983) 60, 3–19.

¹⁷ Wolin allows for a slight turn in her work in the 1960s towards a less hostile position to democracy through the modification of some of her central categories, which is evident in the final chapter of *On Revolution*. However, even in this more democratic phase, Wolin suggests Arendt's support for the capitalist and centralising ambitions of the American Founding Fathers remains suspect as it undercuts local and deliberative forms of politics.

¹⁸ In Wolin's interpretation, her political ideals are based on a distorted account of Periclean Athens combined with a Homeric emphasis on the production of memorable deeds.

participatory and elitist aspects of Arendt's thought.¹⁹ She argues that claims for Arendt as a radical democrat are troubled by her persistent Nietzschean contempt for mass society and a dismissal of the tastes and preferences of labourers.²⁰ For Canovan, the most dominant image of politics throughout Arendt's work is of a small aristocracy of free men who must defend their freedom against the conformity and necessity of mass society. Nonetheless, Canovan notes that Arendt celebrates direct and participatory forms of politics and the revolutionary spirit of free and spontaneous action. She perceives a fundamental ambivalence in Arendt's writings that allows it to be read in different and at times contradictory ways.

It is undoubted that there are certain troubling elements in Arendt's thought, including those passages that paint the portrait of a nostalgic and conservative thinker. However, the emphasis on such passages has been challenged by a second group of interpreters who have drawn on Arendt's work as a resource for democratic theory.²¹ For these scholars, she is viewed as a valuable corrective to what they perceive as a dominant privatised view of public life, which entails a denigration of politics. The two dominant appropriations of her thought within contemporary democratic theory are the deliberative and agonistic models of democratic politics.²² Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib's deliberative model of democracy is based on a communicative conception of action in which a discursive political community aims for consensus over its basic norms and principles through rational dialogue between free and equal individuals.²³ The aim of this communicative approach is to overcome the threat posed by instrumental rationality to political institutions by revealing the inherent dialogical rationality contained in speech. Benhabib emphasises the co-operative and dialogical accounts

¹⁹ Margaret Canovan, "The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought," *Political Theory* (1978) 6 (5), 5–25. For other interpretations on Arendt's "two politics" see Peter Fuss, "Hannah Arendt's Conception of Political Community," in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Political World*, 157–176; Bhikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1981) 177.

²⁰ Canovan, "The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought," 5–25. On an aristocratic strand in Arendt's thought see also Jean-Philippe Deranty and Emmanuel Renault, "Democratic Agon: Striving for Distinction or Struggle against Domination and Injustice?" in Andrew Schaap (ed.), *Law and Agonistic Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

²¹ Jeffrey Isaac, for example, contends that although Arendt is a critic of mass democracy, she is not against democracy per se. On the contrary, Arendt advances a participatory vision of grassroots politics based in civil society that would rejuvenate rather than supplant democratic government. I will later examine whether we could consider Arendt's writings on democracy to be primarily concerned with questions of civil society. Jeffrey Isaac, "Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics," *American Political Science Review* (1994) 88 (1), 156–168, 156.

²² See Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996). Although, this division creates a limiting framework of binary concepts (such as deliberation versus conflict) that unnecessarily divides Arendt's thought into oppositional terms. See Schmucler Lederman, "Agonism and Deliberation in Arendt," *Constellations* (2014) 21 (3), 327–337.

²³ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*; Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 68; Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," *Social Research* (1977) 44 (1), 3–24.

of politics in Arendt, which is important for the deliberative project by enabling a systematic distinction between instrumental and communicative action. She draws from Arendt's narrative structure of action, the role of political judgment and the importance of the discursive practices of political speech and promises in her account of politics.²⁴ Benhabib ultimately finds Arendt's theory of political action lacking in strong normative foundations and recommends supplementing her work with the normative framework provided by Habermas' political philosophy.²⁵ Honig, on the other hand, insists on Arendt's agonistic account of politics that highlights the unruliness of action and the productive value of political conflict and contestation.²⁶ Action does not require external normative limitations, since it contains its own self-limiting and self-correcting character. For Honig, every political practice and institution should be open to debate and continually called into question as part of the political process.²⁷ Although Honig rejects claims that Arendt is in need of supplements and correctives, she seeks to radicalise Arendt's politics by blurring the strict distinction between public/private and social/political in order to proliferate the sites in which political contestation takes place.²⁸

These two influential readings of Arendt present contrasting pictures of her importance for democratic theory. Although each interpretation rightly emphasises a number of important aspects of Arendt's theory and puts forward a defensible picture of her thought, I seek to challenge the shared underlying interpretive framework of a liberal representative conception of democracy within a sovereign nation-state.²⁹ What unites all the above-mentioned

²⁴ Seyla Benhabib, "Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought," *Political Theory* (1988) 16 (1), 29–51; Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 125, 173.

²⁵ Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 70; Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 93; Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative," *Social Research* (1990) 57 (1), 167–196; Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas," in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) 73–98; Benhabib, "Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought".

²⁶ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Bonnie Honig, "The Politics of Agonism," *Political Theory* (1993) 21 (3), 528–533; Dana R. Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche and the Aestheticization of Politics," *Political Theory* (1992) 20 (2), 274–308.

²⁷ Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 115.

²⁸ Ibid., 115–124; Bonnie Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism," in Bonnie Honig (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) 135–166; Bonnie Honig, "Humanism from an Agonistic Perspective: Themes from the work of Bonnie Honig," *Contemporary Political Theory* (2014) 13 (2), 168–217, 210.

²⁹ In defence of Honig and Benhabib, it could be argued that the agonistic and deliberative models are less accepting of liberal democratic institutions (especially the party system) and more favourably disposed to "council style" participatory structures than given credit in this thesis. Nevertheless, I contend there is evidence that in spite of their efforts to make liberal democracies more participatory and deliberative, these models remained tied to the basic institutional structure of liberal representative democracies.

interpreters is their failure to acknowledge one of Arendt's most radical and challenging of positions: her critique of the basic framework of liberal representative democracy and argument for a form of council democracy.³⁰ The presumption that Arendt's conception of politics should be understood within the horizon of contemporary nation-states and party politics risks mischaracterising her position and misunderstands one of her central thematic concerns.³¹ As a result of her interpreters' framework, important categorical distinctions that Arendt draws such as those between the party system/council system and a sovereign nation-state/federal council state are disregarded or circumvented. Arendt's argument for council democracy cuts diagonally across the agonistic and deliberative debates. Seen from an Arendtian standpoint, both Benhabib and Honig represent forms of parliamentary/party politics, which stand in opposition to Arendt's proposition of an entirely "new form of government," council democracy.³² Perhaps the clearest enunciation of the shared limitation of these interpreters is signalled by Benhabib in her introduction to the edited collection of essays, *Democracy and Difference*.³³ Here, she states that their mutual conception of politics:

focuses on the negotiation, contestation and representation of difference within the public sphere of liberal democracies ... The essays in this volume, in discussing the democratic politics of difference share the assumption that the institutions and culture of liberal democracies are sufficiently complex, supple and decentred so as to allow for the expression of difference without fracturing the identity of the body politic or subverting existing forms of political sovereignty.³⁴

This interpretation of Arendt's work is explicable as a response to the post-Cold War renaissance of liberal scholarship that saw her as the voice of Eastern European dissidents and

³⁰ See Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); James R. Martel, "Amo: Volo ut sis: Love, Willing and Arendt's Reluctant Embrace of Sovereignty," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (2008) 34 (3), 287–313; James R. Martel, "Can There Be Politics Without Sovereignty? Arendt, Derrida and the Question of Sovereign Inevitability" *Law, Culture and the Humanities* (2010) 6 (2), 153–166.

³¹ To be sure, Benhabib is interested in "a plurality of modes of association" within "a public sphere of interlocking and overlapping networks and associations of deliberation contestation and argumentation," rather than a purely state-centric model of politics. However, she still sets her conception of the public sphere within the institutions of a liberal democracy and a sovereign nation-state. Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 74. Similarly, Honig believes in "reclaiming the practice of politics from representative, state-centered and state-centering institutions," but in practice she views the institutions of liberal democracy as the basic framework within which political contestation and "resistability" occur. See Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 125. Her claim that "institutions and individuals are always incomplete, forever calling out for augmentation and amendment" presupposes the background structure of "sustaining liberal democratic values and institutions." Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 115; Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 108.

³² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 249.

³³ This book includes a contribution from Bonnie Honig. Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

the burgeoning civil society movements.³⁵ Her influence in political theory rose dramatically following the fall of communism and the seeming triumph of political mobilisations of non-violent collective action. Jonathan Schell has argued that it would be appropriate to call the third wave of democracy, which includes the democratisation of much of Eastern Europe through a series of largely peaceful revolutions, “Arendtian revolutions.”³⁶ He maintains that her thought embodies the spirit of these non-violent and citizen-led processes of democratisation. Within this context in the 1990s, Arendt was used to support a series of positions internal to liberal democratic theory: deliberative democracy against a “general agonistics” of discourse, communitarianism against liberalism and agonistic politics against Rawlsian justice. Arendt was put to work to criticise various weaknesses of the liberal circumscribing of politics, but only rarely in a manner that would call into question the basic institutions of liberal democracy. For these theorists, Arendt’s thought is considered as a supplement to or corrective of traditional liberal democratic institutions and practices.³⁷ However, this interpretation obscures her value for contemporary reflections on democracy by blunting her critique of liberal representative democracy and displacing her distinctive argument for a council democracy. The return to council-styled political movements in Occupy Wall Street and the Spanish and Greek *indignados* provides impetus for a reorientation of our perspective on Arendt’s democratic councils.³⁸

Without denying the complexity of her writings or moments of ambiguity, I argue that there is a clear and persistent radical democratic current in Arendt’s work that is most visible in her argument for a council democracy.³⁹ In revisiting a number of her marginal texts, we discover that Arendt has more to say concerning democracy and is more openly partisan of democratic

³⁵ Bruce Ackerman, *The Future of Liberal Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 1; Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 1–2; Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, xlv; Dick Howard, “Keeping the Republic: Reading Arendt’s On Revolution after the Fall of the Wall,” *Democratija* (2007) 9, 122–140.

³⁶ Jonathan Schell, “Introduction,” in Arendt, *On Revolution*, xi–xxix.

³⁷ Margie Lloyd, “In Tocqueville’s Shadow: Hannah Arendt’s Liberal Republicanism,” *The Review of Politics* (1995) 57 (1), 31–58.

³⁸ The extra-parliamentary and radically democratic structure of the general assemblies of the most recent wave of political movements presents interesting parallels with the council movement. However, one should not overemphasise their similarities as the council movement has a number of distinctive characteristics. In chapter two, I provide a definition of the councils and compare them to other similar historical movements and institutions.

³⁹ A radical interpretation of Arendt, albeit from a republican rather than a democratic perspective, has also been provided by Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*. For a more critical angle see Ferdinando G. Menga, “The Seduction of Radical Democracy: Deconstructing Hannah Arendt’s Political Discourse,” *Constellations* (2014) 21 (3), 313–326.

forms of politics than some scholars have acknowledged.⁴⁰ Contrary to Wolin's insistence that she never directly addresses the topic, Arendt articulates her understanding of democratic politics as consisting of "active participation in public matters, and not only the protection of certain fundamental rights."⁴¹ She argues that the councils were a "direct regeneration of democracy," although, perhaps not in the state-centric and representative way it has traditionally been understood.⁴² For Arendt, "the councils have always been undoubtedly democratic, but in a sense never seen before and never thought about."⁴³ Upon closer examination, references to the councils can be located throughout Arendt's writings.⁴⁴ The recurring theme of the council system gives us cause to reconsider its role in her work. Rather than a curious anomaly that is best overlooked, the council system ought to occupy a central position in our understanding of Arendt's political thought.

The turn to the council system in this thesis follows a more general trend from a focus on Arendt's theory of political action towards the institutional dimensions of her thought.⁴⁵ Previously, democratic theorists have been inclined to view Arendt's account of political action as the cornerstone of her work, even if they disagreed over how this should be understood. As a result, Arendt's writings on political institutions have been partly overlooked and misconstrued.⁴⁶ Benhabib, for example, criticises Arendt for holding a free-floating and "institutionally unanchored" conception of politics in need of the addition of a Habermasian theory of the public sphere in order to ground it.⁴⁷ Others have interpreted Arendt as preoccupied with a model of an undifferentiated ancient city-state, eliding the complexities of modern civil society and political institutions.⁴⁸ More recently, however, there has been a greater appreciation for the value of Arendt's institutional writings, resulting in the

⁴⁰ Wolin, "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political," 3.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, "Nationalstaat und Demokratie," *HannahArendt.net* (2006) 1 (2), available at <http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/94/154>.

⁴² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 255.

⁴³ Hannah Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," *Journal of Politics* (1958) 20 (1), 5–43, 30.

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007) 343–374, 388–401; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) 215–220, Arendt, *On Revolution*, 247–273; Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 189–191, Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution"; Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970) 52; Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 327; Arendt, "The Impotence of Power," Arendt Papers, 014410.

⁴⁵ See in particular the articles collected in Marco Goldoni and Christopher McCorkindale (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Law* (Oxford and Portland, Oregon: Hart Publishing, 2012).

⁴⁶ George Kateb, "Political Action: its Nature and Advantages," in Dana R. Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 130–148.

⁴⁷ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 198.

⁴⁸ Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

decline of a perception of Arendt's "polis envy" and her rejection of modern forms of organisation.⁴⁹ Jeremy Waldron has highlighted the importance of a stable institutional framework in Arendt's political theory and its relation to a constitution, legislation, judiciary, voting and civil liberties.⁵⁰ The focus on the councils that I pursue here reveals that it is not merely the stabilising power of institutions that Arendt valued. Rather, she admired the councils as institutions of decentralised self-governance that cultivated political participation and formed new centres of power. As her most preferred institutional arrangement for modern politics, the council system should be weighted equally alongside Arendt's theory of action and political freedom, for it is only through their concrete embodiment in the institutions of a council republic that these concepts can be properly understood.

Uncovering the importance of the councils gives rise to a need to reassess our view of Arendt's position in contemporary political theory. If any form of consensus could be said to exist over such a heterodox thinker, it is that Arendt is best placed in the classical republican tradition.⁵¹ This is due to her preference for the figure of the active citizen over the rights-holder, her emphasis on strong institutions and the rule of law and her passionate commitment to political action and the public realm.⁵² However, the extent to which this republicanism undergoes a council communist inflection has not been fully appreciated.⁵³ Arendt is neither a classical republican in the line of Aristotle or Cicero nor, strictly speaking, a modern republican such as Montesquieu or the Federalists. It is well understood that Arendt rejects the dominant tradition in political theory of a sovereign state logic from Hobbes to Rousseau.⁵⁴ But Arendt's turn to a counter-tradition includes the figures of Luxemburg and the council communists, as much as the earlier modern republicans. The resulting amalgamation is at times an unstable coalition of thinkers, resulting in a productive tension in her work. This allows it to be read in ways that she may not have authorised or predicted. It was not just any form of republicanism that Arendt thought desirable, but a "soviet republic,"

⁴⁹ In remarks presented for a panel on Hannah Arendt at the American Political Science Association Jean Elshtain suggested that Arendt glorified Athenian democracy and overlooked its many faults weaknesses.

⁵⁰ Jeremy Waldron, "Arendt's Constitutional Politics," in Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 201–219; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 166.

⁵¹ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 201–206; Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 2; Patricia Springborg, "Hannah Arendt and the Classical Republican Tradition," in Gisela Kaplan and Clive S. Kessler (eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom* (Sydney: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 9–17.

⁵² Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 331–333.

⁵³ I intend my interpretation of Arendt as a "council republican" to complement rather than contradict my broader reading of her strong affinities with a "radical democratic (or socialist)" tradition of Rosa Luxemburg. I address the issues of Arendt's ambiguous relation to the council communist tradition below in chapter one.

⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234–236.

a “republic ... founded upon the principles of the council system.”⁵⁵ Her argument for the “foundation of a new body politic” was based upon “a new type of republican government” rather than a strict return to a conservative republican tradition.⁵⁶ Arendt forges new ground in her conception of a council republicanism based on the institutional form of the council system, an institution completely foreign to most republican thinkers.

One potential objection that could be raised against this reading of Arendt’s work is that she never intended the councils to be conceived of as an alternative to contemporary liberal institutions. In this vein, Jeffrey Isaac has argued that Arendt’s council system should be understood as a call for greater civic participation, which constitutes a complement to rather than a replacement of the central institutions of a liberal representative democracy.⁵⁷ He argues against a number of her critics that it is wrong to read Arendt as wishing to put an end to liberal democracy. Along these lines, Margaret Canovan also imagines that the council system would be “an extension downwards of the separation and balancing of power she valued so much in the US Constitution,” which would leave the institutions of Congress in place.⁵⁸ There are some moments at which Arendt could be interpreted in this way, such as where she states that the councils were “the best instruments, for example, for breaking up the modern mass society, with its dangerous tendency toward the formation of pseudo-political mass movements.”⁵⁹

Yet, the main thrust of Arendt’s argument is aligned with an alternative perspective. Arendt is unequivocal that the councils were “a new form of government rather than a mere reform of it or a mere supplement to the existing institutions.”⁶⁰ Arendt elaborates on the matter further in one of her interviews:

I see the possibility of forming a new concept of the state. A council-state of this sort, to which the principle of sovereignty would be wholly alien, would be admirably suited to federations of the most various kinds, especially because in it power would be constituted horizontally and not vertically.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 258.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 265, 259.

⁵⁷ Isaac, “Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics,” 156–168.

⁵⁸ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 236.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 271.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁶¹ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 191.

She states that the two systems were “utterly unlike and even contradictory to each other” and were based on completely opposed principles and structures. The party system is based on a top-down oligarchic structure whereas the council system is a bottom-up system of participation. The majority of Arendt’s examples of the council system such as Russia and Germany in 1917-1918 and Hungary in 1956 were not projects of liberal civic-mindedness, but attempts at the transformation of state political apparatuses. Admittedly, there is some ambiguity surrounding this point. But the most plausible explanation of Arendt’s position – given her many criticisms of the party system and her support for a new form of council system – is that her writings on the councils were directed towards imagining the transformation of the sovereign nation-state into a federal council state.

However, this statement requires some qualification. I do not claim that Arendt intended her writings on the councils as a straightforward remedy to current democratic malaise. Arendt drew from a variety of different epochs, traditions, practices and institutions in her work from the ancient and modern world. To argue that Arendt proposed a simple model of democracy based entirely on the democratic councils would be an untenable reduction of the multiplicity of different perspectives from which Arendt addressed the problems of modern politics.⁶² There is no single dominant source to which we must return in order to provide a blueprint for modern political institutions. Arendt’s retrieval of the councils is part of a strategy to disrupt modern triumphalist narratives and open a dialogue with the past in which we can engage with both the strengths and weaknesses of previous political experiences. A simple return to the councils as a model of politics would be an inadequate response to current pressing issues, just as Arendt’s political theory in itself does not provide a ready manual for democratic politics today. Instead, her argument for a council democracy serves as a critical lens through which we can constructively engage with contemporary democratic politics.

Retrieving the Councils

⁶² This thesis aims to focus specifically on the question of council democracy in Arendt’s work. This results in some major aspects of Arendt’s thought falling outside the scope of examination. One major omission is the philosophical influences of Heidegger and Jaspers on Arendt’s work. On the influence of Heidegger see Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 113–143. On the influence of Jaspers see Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, “Existentialism Politicized: Arendt’s Debt to Jaspers,” *The Review of Politics* (1991) 53 (3), 435–468.

Arendt traces the origins of the council movement back to its forerunners in the townships and wards of pre-revolutionary America and the *sociétés populaires* of the French Revolution. Starting with these nascent grass-roots organisations, she narrates the rise and fall of the councils through the Paris Commune, the Russian and German revolutions and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.⁶³ However, Arendt's characterisation of the councils as emerging at the birth of modern politics in the French Revolution overstretches the historical reality of the council form. The majority of working examples of councils developed through the awakening of revolutionary hopes and a flurry of political activity during and in the aftermath of the First World War.⁶⁴ As imperial forces collapsed during the two "red years" after the war, Europe was set ablaze with mass strikes, factory occupations, soldier mutinies and the strongest organisation of socialist forces since 1848.⁶⁵ The councils arose in Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary and Italy in a power vacuum left by crippled old regimes. They were bolstered by a wave of rising expectations for social and political transformation across Europe. Organising in opposition to capitalist alienation, authoritarian political control and the bureaucratic state, the councils were fiercely resisted by established institutions as a direct threat to their power.⁶⁶ This emerging council movement represented the democratic impulses of the working class striving towards workers' control over the production process and the formation of radically democratic political institutions. Although there were a number of different experiences of workers' councils and a broad range of settings in which they arose, the classic image of council democracy was a pyramidal structure of voluntary associations organised through workplaces and barracks with a national executive council composed of directly elected and recallable delegates.⁶⁷

As innovative democratic organs of working-class struggle, the councils were remarkable institutions that deserve close attention in their own right. However, the question of council democracy has exercised little to no influence on mainstream democratic thought.⁶⁸ This is

⁶³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 254.

⁶⁴ Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905–1921* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974) 5.

⁶⁵ Albert S. Lindemann, *The Red Years: European Socialism Versus Bolshevism, 1919–1921* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) xiii.

⁶⁶ Medearis, "Lost or Obscured? How V. I. Lenin, Joseph Schumpeter and Hannah Arendt Misunderstood the Council Movement," 451.

⁶⁷ In chapter two, I engage more thoroughly with historiographical debates concerning the structure and function of council institutions.

⁶⁸ John Dryzek, "Democratic Political Theory," in Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas (eds.), *Handbook of Political Theory* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004) 143–154. There are still echoes of the ideal of council democracy in certain participatory theories of democracy and socialist writings. See Carole Pateman,

surprising given its historical significance. In spite of their political defeat across the continent, the councils achieved remarkable lasting successes, including contributing to ending the First World War, bringing down the Russian and German monarchies, introducing the eight-hour workday and instituting women's suffrage.⁶⁹ They were the only institutions of the time that could genuinely be said to represent the interests of the working classes.⁷⁰ They thereby facilitated the entrance of the workers as historical actors on the political stage in their own right. The councils symbolise one of the first attempts by the working classes to autonomously re-organise the structural conditions of their existence. As an institutional form, they provided an open and flexible organisational structure that promoted revolutionary initiative and adapted reasonably well to changing circumstances. Although the councils suffered from significant internal weaknesses and were ultimately unsuccessful in many of their political goals, both the accomplishments and the challenges of the councils provide useful material for reconsidering contemporary democratic practices. In neglecting the council movements, political theory risks failing to capitalise on the many resources available through a closer study of this significant historical period.

As democracy continues to be hollowed out by a neoliberal rationality of governance, reflections on the democratic actions of the councils offer possible avenues of resistance to democracy's erosion.⁷¹ The councils shed light on how to deepen and extend democratic values and practices in the face of institutional opposition and resistance. They serve as an example of how political collectives can mobilise to challenge entrenched power structures and implement a transformative democratic program in the interests of ordinary citizens. The councils' significance for contemporary political theory resides in their role as transformative organs of democratisation that sought to introduce democratic conditions at the most fundamental level of social organisation. An analysis of these forms of democratic action inspires reflection on ways they could be reclaimed in the present.

Drawing from Arendt, but going beyond the letter of her writings, I intend to deploy the councils as an historical *exemplar* in a specific sense. According to Arendt, an example is a

Participation and Democratic Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); C. B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 93–115. See also Jason Schulman (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁶⁹ Ralf Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2014) 8.

⁷⁰ Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905–1921*, 4–5.

⁷¹ Wendy Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” *Theory & Event* (2003) 7 (1).

singular and concrete instantiation of a more general principle that cannot be explicitly formulated or determined as a rule.⁷² An historical act or event can be seen as an example containing an “exemplary validity,” a way “to see in the particular what is valid for more than one case.”⁷³ An example is a particular that reveals a generality that can in no other way be defined – in the sense for Arendt that “courage is *like* Achilles.”⁷⁴ Arendt’s appreciation of the force of examples has been built upon in the recent work of Aletta Norval, which I find instructive as guidance on the use of exemplarity within political theory.⁷⁵ Turning to the writings of Jacques Rancière and Stanley Cavell, Norval articulates the two-fold disruptive and disclosive function of historical examples. On the one hand, examples serve as a critical tool against existing institutions, demonstrating the contingency of the current order and countering the effects of dominant political narratives.⁷⁶ The demands raised by certain historical examples go beyond that which the present order can assimilate. Their role is to unsettle and provoke us. In this sense, the presentation of the striking differences between the council system and current forms of democratic politics reveals our troubling distance from a more substantive vision of political freedom and democracy. On the other hand, examples open up a new horizon of imagination and provide us with an expanded scope of the possibilities for transformation.⁷⁷ Without losing their singular or historical character, examples represent concrete instances of different forms of action and organisation that nonetheless gesture beyond themselves and call for emulation in a non-imitative sense. Rather than consider the councils as a replicable organisational model for the present, an analysis of their political struggles provides guidance for how to transform contemporary democratic institutions.

⁷² On Arendt’s use of examples see Kristie McClure, “The Odor of Judgment: Exemplarity, Propriety, and Politics in the Company of Hannah Arendt,” in Craig J. Calhoun and John McGowan (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997) 53–84. On a broader exploration of the notion of exemplarity in contemporary philosophy see Alessandro Ferrara, *The Force of the Example: Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁷³ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 85.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁵ Aletta J. Norval, “‘Writing a Name in the Sky’: Rancière, Cavell, and the Possibility of Egalitarian Inscription,” *American Political Science Review* (2012) 106 (4), 810–826.

⁷⁶ This dimension of historical examples is aptly employed by Rancière in his historical writings. See Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-century France* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) 20, 116, 137.

⁷⁷ On the potential world-expanding role of historical examples see Melissa Lane, “Constraint, Freedom, and Exemplar: History and Theory without Teleology,” in Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears (eds.), *Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 128–50. Norval argues that although this aspect of Rancière’s use of historical examples is neglected by his readers, it is also present in his work. Norval, “‘Writing a Name in the Sky’: Rancière, Cavell, and the Possibility of Egalitarian Inscription,” 820.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One reconsiders the position of council democracy in Hannah Arendt's political theory. It traces the origins and development of the council system to two primary sources in Arendt's work: a council communist tradition of Rosa Luxemburg and Arendt's participation in Jewish politics in the 1930s and 1940s concerning different organisational forms of a Jewish homeland. I demonstrate the importance of this neglected aspect of Arendt's political thought and reveal its significance in each of Arendt's main texts. I claim that the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 marks a turning point in Arendt's reflections on the councils and provides a practical confirmation of the continuing significance of the council form. Next, I scrutinise the contradictions of her apprehensive appropriation of the councils from the labour movement and explicate the reasons behind her complex disavowal of a socialist council tradition. The analysis reveals that Arendt's republicanism undergoes a council communist inflection, which has not yet been fully appreciated. Her distinct variety of council republicanism emphasises the participatory and popularly empowered nature of council institutions.

Chapter Two examines the historical context of the councils in order to reveal the biases of Arendt's interpretation and situate her analysis within a richer historical portrait. Arendt writes a mythology of the councils, which distorts our understanding of them and gives rise to a need for a historical reassessment. I return to the political experiences of the councils through an account of their emergence in Russia and Germany amidst the political crisis of the immediate post-First World War period. These two case studies present valuable historical material relating to the political struggles of the councils and provide several important modifications to Arendt's interpretation. While Arendt presents the council system as a new form of government, the councils were more frequently understood by participants as oppositional institutions that sought to control governing bodies and further the aims of the revolutionary movement. Contra Arendt, the councils also undertook extensive economic planning, social welfare activities and sought to democratise workplaces and barracks.

Chapter Three addresses the idiosyncratic role Arendt's concept of political "principles" plays in her attempt to retrieve lost experiences and meanings of politics. Arendt argues that

attending to the importance of principles in politics offers new possibilities for reconnecting with the past and transforming contemporary practices. Arendtian principles contain a transformative potential insofar as they are able to disrupt modern narratives and open up a broader horizon of political ideas. I propose a new interpretive framework for understanding their political logic and the varied contexts within which they appear in Arendt's work. Secondly, I reconstruct the three main principles of Arendt's council system: political freedom, empowerment and federalism. In this way, I continue to develop my analysis of a radical democratic current in Arendt's work by providing an interpretation of her political theory from the perspective of the council system. I argue that her purpose is to contribute to a debate over desirable forms of democratic government and to question the hegemony of current forms of liberal representative democracy.

Chapter Four critically appraises Arendt's institutional design of a council democracy. Arendt's own institutional arrangements are most intelligible when viewed as a response to the perceived shortcomings of modern representative democracies. As a consequence, the chapter begins with Arendt's critique of current democratic regimes. I then analyse Arendt's institutional sketches and argue that the intended transformations of her council system are more radical and far-reaching than many of her interpreters have recognised. Arendt argues for the transformation of state institutions towards a federal council state. However, there are a number of tensions and contradictions in Arendt's theoretical contributions. I pay particular attention to the Habermasian criticism of the practical implausibility of the councils in a complex modern society and Arendt's ambiguous concept of political representation. I conclude that Arendt is not able to overcome several crucial contradictions that present themselves when attempting to conceptualise the practical functioning of her council system.

Chapter Five reconsiders the historical role of council democracy and its relevance for contemporary democratic practices. The councils were exemplary of a form of democratic action in which council delegates attempted to equalise power relations between citizens and control political and economic elites. They extended democratic principles outside of the traditional sphere of liberal institutions into the workplace, army and bureaucracy. Central to this practice, I contend, was a concern for democratic forms of organisation in the economic sphere, which expands the horizons of what is traditionally considered relevant for liberal democracy. I contrast this mode of democratic action with two opposing poles of democratic theory: deliberative democracy and the democratic politics of Jacques Rancière.

Chapter 1: The Origins of the Council System

The council system appears to some of Arendt's interpreters as an unrealistic utopian schema that is little more than an aberration in her work. Of the many dismissive remarks from her commentators, it is Margaret Canovan that best captures the dominant view on Arendt's writings on the council system: they "are something of an embarrassment, a curiously unrealistic commitment in someone who laid particular stress on realism in politics."⁷⁸ The councils are viewed as a utopian political project that is completely unworkable in practice. Perhaps such a system could have been possible in a small city-state such as Athens with slavery, restricted citizenship and a greater emphasis on public life, but it is certainly not feasible in our complex post-industrial societies. Benhabib concurs, "Hannah Arendt's model is flawed, because more often than not, it seems to fly in the face of the realities of the modern world."⁷⁹ As a result, the significance for Arendt of the council system has been largely ignored within Arendt scholarship. The concentration of Arendt's main references to the council system in her later work, namely, in the final chapter of *On Revolution* and in an interview published in *Crises of the Republic*, has enabled interpreters to dismiss this institutional proposal as an afterthought, a failed attempt to translate theoretical insights into a practical institutional proposal. Ultimately, such interpretations are possible because of a lack of an adequate understanding of the importance of the council system to Arendt's political theory. It has appeared to some critics that Arendt's councils are a misguided attempt to transform the experiences of Athenian democracy or the Roman Republic into modern institutions.⁸⁰ Such a line of interpretation reads Arendt's discussion of the council system in *On Revolution* as an attempt to imagine under modern conditions her predominantly Greek conception of political action presented in *The Human Condition*.⁸¹ In order to counter this received view, in this chapter I analyse the origins and development of the idea of a council system in Arendt's work and reveal its connections to broader political traditions.

⁷⁸ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 237.

⁷⁹ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 165.

⁸⁰ Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 69; Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 178, 191; Andrew Arato, "Forms of Constitution Making and Theories of Democracy," *Cardozo Law Review* (1995–1996) 17, 191–231, 210–211; James Knauer, "Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action," *American Political Science Review* (1980) 74 (3), 721–733, 722.

⁸¹ Hanna Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 164; Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power"; Cf. Roy T. Tsao, "Arendt Against Athens: Rereading the Human Condition," *Political Theory* (2002) 30 (1), 97–123.

There are two primary sources for Arendt's early conception of the council system. Most crucially, it is connected with a council communist tradition of Rosa Luxemburg that she is exposed to as a child and to which she was then reintroduced through her husband, Heinrich Blücher. It is from modern workers' struggles rather than ancient Athens that Arendt draws her main examples of council systems.⁸² Secondly, Arendt comes to the idea of the councils through her participation in Jewish politics in the 1930s and 1940s. This can be seen both from her practical experiences of *kibbutzim* on a trip to Palestine in 1935 and in her theoretical engagement with the political problems of different organisational forms of a Jewish homeland. By the late 1940s the idea of a federal, locally-based council system as the theoretically most defensible form of politics for modern societies is firmly established in her thought. The councils can be read as implicitly contained in her analysis of totalitarianism as a second and parallel "new form of government" alongside totalitarian forms, which could be added to the theoretical tradition of Western politics. The complete failure of her proposal for a Jewish homeland and the ensuing war following the creation of a Jewish nation-state left Arendt in despair about the possibilities of modern politics. However, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 marks a turning point in Arendt's conception of the council system. The spontaneous emergence of revolutionary councils immediately following the breakdown of the old communist regime provides Arendt's vision with a practical confirmation of the continuing significance of the council form. Arendt writes in enthusiastic support of the nascent institutions developed by the Hungarian revolutionaries on the anniversary of the uprising.⁸³ This event also provides Arendt with the inspiration for a broader theoretical project. In *On Revolution*, Arendt narrates the history of modern politics as a struggle between the embattled council system and what she terms "the party system." The council system is placed within a framework of revolution and political freedom stretching back to the French and American revolutions. She offers a history and defence of the council system, evocatively describing its heroic struggle and tragic demise at the hands of the party system throughout the modern period.

However, Arendt's project of a retrieval of the council system is marked by a basic contradiction that runs throughout her work. Arendt attempts to deracinate the council system from its theoretical roots in Marxism and its deep connections to working class struggles.

⁸² Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 399; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 257.

⁸³ Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution".

While Arendt must rely on the labour movement for nearly all of her examples of practical realisations of councils, she simultaneously attempts to extract them from their socialist origins and to overlook their economic functions. Using Luxemburg as her key figure, Arendt seeks to read the history of the councils from a republican rather than a socialist perspective. She turns to the popular societies of the French Revolution and to Jefferson's late writings on a republic of wards as anticipating the council form of the early twentieth century. The councils' economic activities are ignored or declared counterproductive and ineffective. Jefferson, rather than Pannekoek, becomes the paradigmatic theorist in her development of the council form.⁸⁴ However, Arendt's strategy of reading down and excluding undesirable elements from her account is not entirely successful. She is forced at a number of points throughout her work to confront the councils' joint economic and political functions and their persistent socialist intentions and goals.⁸⁵ The councils thus represent an exemplary moment of the failure of Arendt's attempts to enforce a separation of politics from socio-economic concerns. Interpreted along strictly Arendtian lines, we distort and misunderstand the tradition of the councils.⁸⁶ Arendt grasps the councils as a source for the rejuvenation of democratic agency, but she unduly restricts their sphere of operation. Instead of writing her own tradition of the council system, Arendt would have done better to listen more attentively to the voices and experiences of the political actors themselves. To fill this lacuna, in the next chapter I undertake a historical re-examination of the councils to provide a more grounded analysis of their structure and goals.

Heinrich Blücher and the Council Tradition

There is a strong claim for the profound influence that "Arendt's Socrates," her husband Heinrich Blücher, had over the development of her political thought.⁸⁷ Arendt writes to her friend and mentor, Karl Jaspers, that it was from Blücher that she "learned to think politically."⁸⁸ Until Arendt met Blücher in 1936, she had been primarily concerned with "the

⁸⁴ See Thomas Jefferson, *Jefferson: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003).

⁸⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 215–220.

⁸⁶ Medearis, "Lost or Obscured? How V. I. Lenin, Joseph Schumpeter and Hannah Arendt Misunderstood the Council Movement".

⁸⁷ See Lotte Köhler (ed.), *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936–1968* (New York: Harcourt, 2000).

⁸⁸ Hannah Arendt, "Letter from Arendt to Jaspers, 29 January 1946," in Lotte Köhler and Hans Sannes (eds.), *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926–1969* (New York: Harcourt, 1992) 29, 507.

Jewish Question.”⁸⁹ It was Blücher who turned her attention to revolutionary politics and gave her a renewed interest in Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, as well as the writings of one of Blücher’s former comrades, Rosa Luxemburg.⁹⁰ Young-Bruehl surmises from the available evidence that “the stories he told her of his political past shaped her vision, both critical and constructive, her understanding of resistance and revolution, and her theory of republicanism.”⁹¹ This critical influence of Blücher is often quickly passed over and diminished in conservative readings of Arendt. Margaret Canovan merely points to an early “radical populist orientation” in Arendt’s writings prior to 1950 and emphasises that Arendt herself was never a Marxist.⁹² But with the publication of their correspondence, we have reason to believe that the influence of Blücher went much deeper. Arendt herself notes that “in marriage it is not easy to tell the partners’ thoughts apart.”⁹³ Blücher was a member of the *Spartakusbund*, which following the Russian Revolution began advocating for the political organisation of workers’ councils in Germany on the model of the Russian *soviets*. After the failure of the Spartacist Uprising and the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Blücher remained a member of the German Communist Party (KPD) in a minority faction that defended the strategy of workers’ councils against the growing intrusion of centralising forces from Moscow.⁹⁴ The organisational form of local, “bottom-up” workers’ councils remained an integral part of Blücher’s politics. His account of the separation of the leadership of the party from the grass-roots councils had a lasting effect on Arendt. Young-Bruehl states that:

The decline and fall of the German Communist party, as Blücher recounted it, provided Hannah Arendt with a clear image – one she never failed to refer to – of what any revolution cannot be without: spontaneously organized, locally based councils or *Räte*, which are controlled neither by existing party councils – in this case, those of the Social Democratic party – nor any external, foreign organizations, in this case the Moscow party.⁹⁵

Blücher’s stories of his involvement in these events would have been powerful for Arendt as they evoked her own experiences as a young girl. Arendt’s family home during the First World War was a meeting place for enthusiastic political discussion among her parents’ social

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) 125.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 65.

⁹³ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 45–46.

⁹⁴ Wolfgang Heuer, “Hannah Arendt and her Socrates,” (2004), available at http://www.bard.edu/bluecher/rel_misc/heuer.pdf

⁹⁵ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 128.

democratic friends. Although many of these were opposed to the more radical Spartacus League, Arendt's mother was a great admirer of Rosa Luxemburg. Arendt's mother took her to the discussions of the Königsberg circle about the Spartacist Uprising of early 1919, informing her daughter, "you must pay attention, this is a historical moment!"⁹⁶

Blücher's experience in revolutionary politics opened Arendt to a theoretical tradition of overlapping and intertwined radical Left tendencies including council communism, anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary socialism. However, Arendt's relationship to this tradition is complex as it involves a simultaneous dependence and disavowal.⁹⁷ While Arendt must turn to the revolutionary tradition for the majority of practical examples of functioning council systems, she retains a great ambivalence towards their Marxist ideology and their deep concern with economic and social issues. When Arendt details the concrete political forms of the council system in *On Revolution*, the examples she refers to are all workers' movements: the Parisian Commune of 1871, the 1905 Russian Revolution, the February 1917 Russian Revolution, the 1918-1919 revolution in Germany, in which she includes the soldiers' and workers' councils in Berlin and the short-lived Bavarian *Räterepublik*, and lastly, the Hungarian 1956 Revolution.⁹⁸ It is within a working class tradition that the council system has received its most thorough theoretical explorations and its most viable practical forms. However, at every turn she attempts to limit or read down both the role of workers as a class and the economic nature of their activity in the councils. The clearest example of this is in her analysis of the labour movement in *The Human Condition*, which will be discussed below.

Furthermore, Arendt turns a blind eye to theoretical discussions of workers' councils within the revolutionary tradition. For Arendt to claim that the emergence of council systems has "no tradition" and that it has been "neglected to the point of oblivion" is disingenuous, since by the time she was writing *On Revolution* there was a relatively small but significant body of literature on the council system.⁹⁹ For instance, it was not difficult for the student and workers' movements of the late 1960s to immediately connect their own struggles with those

⁹⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁹⁷ Arendt explicitly denies being on the German Left. Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, "'Eichmann in Jerusalem': An exchange of letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt," *Encounter* (1964) 22, 53.

⁹⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 254.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 253.

of the 1917–1919 era and look to the council system for guidance.¹⁰⁰ For a study that appears to be an analysis and defence of the council system, the final chapter of *On Revolution* contains surprisingly few references to the literature within the revolutionary tradition, which, *contra* Arendt, has incorporated the council form into its political thought, albeit in a minor tendency. The writings of Antonio Gramsci, Karl Korsch, Anton Pannekoek and Otto Rühle, to name but a few of the central thinkers, remain noticeably absent from Arendt’s bibliography.¹⁰¹ Arendt makes passing reference to the anarchists, Proudhon and Bakunin, only to summarily dismiss them as “singularly unequipped” to adequately conceptualise the council system.¹⁰² The problem with Arendt’s reading is not only that it distorts our understanding of the council tradition, but also that it prevents a more thorough engagement with this tradition that would draw from its resources and lead to a richer and more sustained debate. It is possible that Arendt was perhaps unaware of the depth of the writings on the council form, but what is more likely is that she deliberately avoided making reference to them so that she could recast the council system in a non-Marxist form. To be sure, Arendt attempts a double move. First, she fails to note the socialist literature on the councils, which enables her to write her own history unencumbered by the revolutionary socialist tradition. In a second step, she pushes the council system back to the revolutionary era of America and France, making Jefferson its first, and perhaps most illustrious, spokesperson. This minimises the socialist influence by shifting attention away from Marxist theorists and transforming the socialist workers’ councils of the 1917–1919 period into merely one instance of a broader movement of “ward republics” and “town hall meetings” throughout the modern era.

For her analysis of the practical functioning of the council system Arendt relied heavily on Oskar Anweiler’s study, *Die Rätebewegung in Russland 1905–1921*.¹⁰³ Her references and bibliography reveal that Anweiler’s text was Arendt’s main, almost solitary, source for the

¹⁰⁰ See Ernest Mandel, “Workers’ Control and Workers’ Councils,” *International* (1973) 2 (1), 1–17; Bernard Reichenbach and Rudi Dutschke, “The KAPD in Retrospect: An Interview with a Member of the Communist Workers Party of Germany,” *Solidarity* (1969) 6 (2).

¹⁰¹ Antonio Gramsci, “Soviets in Italy,” *New Left Review* (1968) 51, 28–58; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1910–20*, ed. Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977); Karl Korsch, *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977); Karl Korsch, “What is Socialization? A Program of Practical Socialism,” *New German Critique* (1975) 6, 60–81; Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*; Otto Rühle, *Non-Leninist Marxism: Writings on the Workers’ Councils* (St Petersburg, Florida: Red and Black Publishers, 2007).

¹⁰² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 253.

¹⁰³ Anweiler, *The Soviets*.

history of the council system, a study to which she declared herself “much indebted.”¹⁰⁴ Some of Anweiler’s methodological choices and political commitments help explain aspects of Arendt’s own position. However, Arendt also departs from Anweiler’s interpretation, extracting the council system from its history of class struggle. Firstly, Anweiler isolates the council system as a unique and independent form of government with its own principles and history, distinguishing between the emergence of the soviets on the one hand and Bolshevism as a political ideology on the other. This distinction enables Arendt to be simultaneously pro-council system and anti-Bolshevik. She is able to hold on to the councils as an institutional form in spite of their later transformation by the Bolshevik Party.¹⁰⁵ This demarcation is important for Arendt, who continuously emphasises that the council system represented an entirely new form of government and a distinct political phenomenon. Although Anweiler’s study is primarily concerned with the Russian councils, he identifies a more general concept of the councils, a “*Rätegedanken*” that is not limited to its particular manifestation in Russia. Anweiler defines the basic principle of the council system to be the “striving towards a possible direct, broad and unrestricted participation of individuals in public life.”¹⁰⁶ This principle of participation in public life is essential to how Arendt understands political freedom and explains why she believes it is so adequately embodied in the council system. In addition, Anweiler provides three characteristics that are shared by all councils: their commitment to a determinate and repressed social class, their radical democratic form and their origins in revolutionary uprisings.¹⁰⁷ Of the three, Arendt subscribes only to the latter two. She does not view the councils as representing a particular class. Instead, she argues for the participation of all citizens in the council system. In this way, she replaces a politics of class struggle with one of democratic republicanism. Anweiler also presents three different types of councils that have arisen in modern societies: councils as organs of “the people” organised as a state authority, temporary revolutionary councils, and workers’ councils. In *On Revolution* Arendt almost exclusively discusses the first, emphasising that the type of council

¹⁰⁴ The only additional references appear to be Max Adler’s short pamphlet and an article by Helmut Neubauer. Max Adler, *Demokratie und Rätesystem* (Vienna, 1919); Helmut Neubauer, “München und Moskau, 1918–1919. Zur Geschichte der Rätebewegung in Bayern,” *Jahrbücher für die Geschichte Osteuropas* (1958) 4. Consulting Arendt’s notes for *On Revolution* in her archival material also reveals one additional source, Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934). See Arendt, “Bolshevism,” Arendt Papers, 025265. See also Heinrich Koechlin, *Die Pariser Commune von 1871 im Bewusstsein ihrer Anhänger* (Basel: Don Quichotte Verlag, 1950) in Arendt, “Revolution,” Arendt Papers, 027104.

¹⁰⁵ Arendt was critical of the councils’ perversion by the Soviet Union. In a letter to Jaspers she complains in relation to the council system that it is a concept that “the Russians have so violated that hardly anyone can tell anymore what it really is.” Arendt, “Letter from Arendt to Jaspers, 26 December 1956,” in Köhler and Sannes (eds.), *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926–1969*, 306.

¹⁰⁶ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 6 (my translation).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

to which she refers is a permanent organ of government and not a temporary formation or a more limited expression of class interests. Throughout his study, Anweiler highlights the political over the economic nature of the councils, disregarding the important economic role that they played. This perspective allows Arendt to further marginalise the economic aspects of the councils in her own interpretation. Anweiler also portrays Marx and Lenin as betrayers of the council system insofar as they held lofty ideals of council systems in theory but in practice treated them as mere temporary organs of the revolution. This is a position that Arendt develops in her discussion of the fraught relationship between Marxism and the councils. In addition to Anweiler's study, Arendt's other main source within the tradition is the writings of Rosa Luxemburg, which Arendt knew well and referred to a number of times throughout her career. Luxemburg is an important figure in Arendt's relationship to the council system because her reading of Luxemburg is emblematic of her treatment of the entire council communist tradition.

Arendt and Luxemburg

Arendt sees a kindred spirit in Rosa Luxemburg, a pariah and moral dissenter who was passionately committed to public affairs and political freedom.¹⁰⁸ For Arendt, Luxemburg was a pivotal historical figure whose death in 1919 marked the transition between two eras in Germany. Her death signified the failure of the German Communist Party and the moral and political decline of the Left. More so than any other individual of the period, Arendt considers Luxemburg to represent the institutional proposal of the council system. In November 1918, Luxemburg's reflections on strategic and organisational questions led her to support workers' and soldiers' councils as the best model of revolutionary class struggle.¹⁰⁹ As a leading member of the *Spartakusbund*, Luxemburg argued in their manifesto that "the first step" in

¹⁰⁸ Surprisingly, the influence of Luxemburg on Arendt has been given little attention in Arendt scholarship. See Sidonia Blättler and Irene M. Marti, "Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt: Against the destruction of political spheres of freedom," *Hypatia* (2005) 20 (2), 88–101; Bat-Ami Bar On, "Women in Dark Times," in Larry May and Jerome Kohn (eds.), *Arendt Twenty Years On* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997) 287–306; Ralf Kulla, *Revolutionärer Geist und republikanische Freiheit. Über die verdrängte Nähe von Hannah Arendt zu Rosa Luxemburg* (Hannover: Offizin Verlag, 1999); Gustav Auernheimer, "Revolution und Räte bei Hannah Arendt und Rosa Luxemburg," *Utopie kreativ* (2007) 201/202, 698–707; John LeJeune, "Hannah Arendt's Revolutionary Leadership," *Zeitschrift für politische Denken* (2013) (7) 1; Maria Tamboukou, "Love, Narratives, Politics: Encounters Between Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt," *Theory, Culture & Society* (2013) 31 (1), 35–56.

¹⁰⁹ Interestingly, the councils do not play any role as revolutionary political institutions in Luxemburg's writings before November 1918. See Peter Bierl, *Alle Macht den Räten: Rosa Luxemburg. Räte Demokratie und Sozialismus* (Köln: ISP, 1993) 95.

any future revolution “will be the formation of workers and soldiers’ councils.”¹¹⁰ Her failure to gain significant recognition either as a political theorist or politician is, for Arendt, representative of the failure of the council system and the dissipation of the revolutionary spirit. Her death is particularly striking in this regard since she is killed not by the Right, but while interned under the watch of the Social Democratic Party – a metaphor for the crushing of the local and spontaneous organising of the masses by the party system. In spite of Arendt’s critical stance towards the Marxist tradition, there is a surprising confluence between the two thinkers. They share a faith in the political capacities of ordinary citizens and a vigorous critique of attempts to replace active participation with the representative claims of an elite. They are also both critical of the institutions of liberal democracy for failing to enable participation and promote public freedom. Although this connection has not received much attention in the scholarly literature, Arendt’s strong affinity with Luxemburg was noted by many of her contemporaries. In a roundtable discussion with Arendt in 1967, Chomsky remarked on a certain “Luxemburgian and anarchist conception” of politics that “apparently Dr. Arendt and I agree about.”¹¹¹ The similarities should not be overstated, however, as there is a limit to how far Arendt could be described as some kind of Luxemburgian. Luxemburg remained committed to a program of revolutionary socialism in which a revolutionary party played a strategic leadership role in organising the masses towards the transformation of capitalist relations of production into a democratically controlled socialist economy. Arendt draws from Luxemburg, in particular on the points of popular participation and the institutional model of the councils, but the elements of class struggle, party leadership and socialist objectives remain absent from Arendt’s politics.

Luxemburg can be placed at a pivotal moment in the development of Arendt’s thought. The narrative structure of the last chapter of *On Revolution* makes it appear that the council system is ultimately derived from the American revolutionary experience and the writings of Thomas Jefferson, which is then followed by the French Revolution, the Parisian Commune and 20th century revolutions.¹¹² However, in terms of its theoretical origins in Arendt’s thought, the order needs to be reversed. There is both a chronological and conceptual priority

¹¹⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, “Our Program and the Political Situation,” in *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Dick Howard (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 377.

¹¹¹ Hannah Arendt, “The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act?” a panel discussion held on 15 December 1967 in New York, Arendt Papers, 013476. Judith Shklar also views Arendt as tending towards a “Kropotkin-type anarchism”. See Judith N. Shklar, “Hannah Arendt as Pariah,” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 371.

¹¹² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 248–252.

of Luxemburg over Jefferson in Arendt's understanding of the council system. Firstly, it was through reflecting on Luxemburg's *The Russian Revolution* that Arendt conceived of the project of *On Revolution* and came to the idea of a thorough reading of the American Founding Fathers.¹¹³ Secondly, it was the theoretical schema of Luxemburg's analysis that gave Arendt the rough outline of her argument and established the framework within which it would develop. Arendt's analysis of the division between the government and the people, the representatives and the represented, and the leadership and the membership of a movement are taken from reflections on the failure of the 1919 uprising and Luxemburg's theories, rather than directly from the experiences of the American Revolution.¹¹⁴

The structure of Arendt's argument in the last chapter of *On Revolution* indicates a strong Luxemburgian influence on her work. In her analysis of the position of the councils in modern political thought, Arendt avoids establishing the typical East versus West paradigm of her time, which would involve a dichotomy between communism and liberal democracy. Instead, Arendt demonstrates that there are aspects unconducive to freedom within both communist and liberal democratic regimes. The true opposition for Arendt is not between the liberal freedom of democracy and the dictatorship of communism. Rather, it is between the bureaucracy, centralism and paternalism of the party system (both liberal democratic and communist) and the democratic participatory model of the council system. This schema can be seen as a reflection of Luxemburg's final chapter of *The Russian Revolution* in which she highlights the false dichotomy of "democracy or dictatorship" presented by both the reformist democrats (Kautsky) and the Russian communists (Lenin, Trotsky). The former support bourgeois democracy and forever push the possibility of a socialist revolution into the future, while the latter reject the empty formalities of democracy and demand a dictatorship of the party in order to achieve socialism. For Arendt, Luxemburg's choice of "dictatorship over democracy" must be understood not as a rejection of democratic principles, but as a demand for their radical extension beyond the limits of liberal bourgeois democracy. Although they differ in their understanding of how democracy should be radicalised, they agree on the inadequacies of liberal democratic institutions for the effective participation of citizens in public life. Their democratic politics call for the deepening of democracy through the active participation of the masses in political institutions.

¹¹³ Letter from Arendt to Blumenfeld, 31 July 1956, quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 294.

¹¹⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 233.

Of particular importance for Arendt was Luxemburg's defence of the core democratic principles of civil liberties and free speech against their suppression by the Bolshevik Party. A critical turning point of the Russian Revolution for Luxemburg was in the Bolshevik's decision to dissolve the Constituent Assembly, which in her eyes had been based on "the most democratic suffrage in the world."¹¹⁵ To reject the peoples' representatives in this assembly and to institute illiberal and repressive measures such as banning free speech, the freedom of association and a free press was unjustifiable for Luxemburg because "the only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion."¹¹⁶ If it could be said that the institutions no longer represented the will of the people, the true question is why could new elections not be called. For Luxemburg, the path to socialism must be based upon the extension rather than the reduction of liberal rights available in bourgeois democracies.

Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule.¹¹⁷

The crucial ingredient is "the active participation of the masses" through which the "social inequality and lack of freedom hidden under the sweet shell of formal equality and freedom" would be overcome and bourgeois democracy would be transformed into a socialist democracy.¹¹⁸ What Luxemburg refers to as the dictatorship of the proletariat is in fact "the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, of unlimited democracy."¹¹⁹ All of this will only be possible "subjected to the control of complete public activity; it must arise out of the growing political training of the mass of the people."¹²⁰ While there are good reasons to doubt Arendt's revolutionary credentials,¹²¹ she does draw extensively from Luxemburg's politics of mass participation, independent political action and spontaneous forms of organisation. Additionally, in spite of her criticisms of representative democracy,

¹¹⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1961) 48.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71–72.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76–77.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹²¹ Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 30. See also Mary McCarthy, "Hannah Arendt and Politics," in William Phillips (ed.), *Partisan Review: The 50th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Stein and Day, 1984) 242–251.

Arendt refuses to reject the basic principles of constitutional guarantees and civil rights. For Arendt, civil rights were not to be taken for granted, for “the distance between tyranny and constitutional, limited government is as great as, perhaps greater than, the distance between limited government and freedom.”¹²² However, the negative liberties of liberal representative democracies are not the same as the active participation of individuals in a council system. She stressed that there “should be no reason for us to mistake civil rights for political freedom.”¹²³

Luxemburg’s most important contribution to political theory for Arendt is the claim that political action precedes and creates political organisation and not vice versa. It relates to an insight into the necessity of the active participation of the masses within democratic institutions in order to retain their strength and vitality. Luxemburg learns from the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the soviets that the organisation of revolutionary activity cannot be directed by party officials and handed down to passive rank and file members. The demand for action must come from below through the workers organising themselves into participatory institutions in which they can act. The most effective and robust institutions are created through political action and are a direct result of its labour. Although political action precedes institutions, Luxemburg does not wish to dissolve all democratic representative institutions into a more fluid movement that could be directed by a party elite. Active organisations will require some form of representation so that large groups of people can co-ordinate action through delegates. Luxemburg defends the “mechanism of democratic institutions” and is critical of Trotsky’s claim of “the inadequacy of any popular representation whatsoever.”¹²⁴ What distinguishes good democratic institutions from non-democratic ones is the degree to which they are able to represent the views of those they claim to represent. In Luxemburg’s view, democratic institutions should be infused with the spirit and the will of the people and be responsive to their demands. Luxemburg counters Trotsky’s criticisms of the Russian Constituent Assembly as unrepresentative of the current revolutionary mood of the people by stating that while no human institution is perfect, democratic institutions possess a powerful corrective, namely “the living movement of the masses, their unending pressure. And the more democratic the institutions, the livelier and stronger the pulse-beat of the political life of the masses, the more direct and complete is their

¹²² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 210.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, 60.

influence.”¹²⁵ Luxemburg expresses the radical democratic desire to have a close relationship between democratic institutions and the people they represent in which ordinary citizens remain passionately connected with public life and involved in the public affairs of their community. She imagines institutions which house the political energies of their people and facilitate engagement and participation such that “the living fluid of the popular mood continuously flows around the representative bodies, penetrates them, guides them.”¹²⁶

Arendt’s reading of Luxemburg is symptomatic of her stance on the council tradition as a whole. Although she draws on many of Luxemburg’s ideas, she reads Luxemburg as a republican rather than a socialist. Arendt attempts to drive a wedge between Marx and Luxemburg, arguing that Luxemburg’s theoretical criticisms of orthodox Marxism suggest that “it might be doubted that she was a Marxist at all.”¹²⁷ Relating to her practical activities, Arendt argues that “her involvement with European politics outside the immediate interests of the working class, and hence completely beyond the horizon of all Marxists” is due to what Arendt views as her “repeated insistence on a ‘republican program.’”¹²⁸ Arendt seeks to save Luxemburg from certain aspects of Marxist ideology and recoup her for Arendt’s own republican project. Arendt argues that it is the issue of republicanism that “separated her most decisively from all others.”¹²⁹ This is an unusual claim given the repeated references to Marxism, revolutionary socialism and class struggle throughout Luxemburg’s work. It is true that Luxemburg, like Marx, Engels and most other revolutionaries, stood for a democratic republic against forms of monarchism, but this was as a means for carrying out class struggle and pursuing the ultimate goal of a transformation from capitalism to socialism.¹³⁰

Arendt’s assertion that republicanism was “one of the main points of her famous *Juniusbroschüre*” is not defensible.¹³¹ Luxemburg describes the essay, which became the manifesto for the Spartacus League, as the “socialist programme of the proletariat.”¹³² The few moments at which republicanism is mentioned are mainly in relation to bourgeois France

¹²⁵ Ibid, 62.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 38.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹³⁰ Alan Johnson, “A Critical Reply to Stephen Eric Bronner,” in Schulman (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*, 29.

¹³¹ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 51.

¹³² Luxemburg, “Our Program and the Political Situation,” in *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Dick Howard, 357.

and could hardly be counted as evidence against Luxemburg's entire corpus of revolutionary socialism. Luxemburg was no orthodox Marxist, but to describe her as a republican (and not also a Marxist/socialist) is to distort the clear historical evidence of her commitment to revolutionary socialism. Arendt places much emphasis on Luxemburg's rejection of orthodox Marxist economics, arguing that on this point she could be distinguished from others in the Marxist camp. Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital*, which Arendt drew from in her analysis of imperialism in *Origins*, argues that capitalist growth is dependent on continual primitive accumulation from pre-capitalist economies, which results in capitalism being able to sustain its growth and not collapse on its own accord, at least not until it has exploited the entire world of its resources. In one sense, this is a revision of Marx's thesis of the internal contradictions of capitalism and its inevitable collapse according to the irrationality of its own logic. However, Luxemburg saw this as a correction rather than a rejection of Marxism altogether. Arendt underestimates the extent to which Luxemburg, despite her criticisms of aspects of Marx's economic theses, remains steadfastly committed to most of his political program. Luxemburg is a revolutionary socialist who, in a speech shortly before her death, stated that "the immediate task of the proletariat is to make socialism a living reality and to destroy capitalism root and branch." She called for mass participation in class struggle in which her party would be "once more advancing under [Marx's] flag."¹³³

The contradictions evident in Arendt's reading of Luxemburg are indicative of a thinker torn between an attraction to valuable insights and a deep suspicion of what undercurrents may lie beneath the surface. Arendt's unfinished project that she began after *Origins* was entitled "The Totalitarian Elements in Marxism" and it is undoubtedly the case that Arendt's misgivings about Marx influenced her reading of Luxemburg. Indeed, it was precisely because of certain undesirable aspects of Luxemburg's work that Arendt ultimately turns to the American Founding Fathers and places Jefferson rather than Luxemburg as the centrepiece of the final chapter of *On Revolution*. In a passage that would have struck Arendt as greatly concerning, Luxemburg explains the inner compulsion of a revolution:

The "golden mean" cannot be maintained in any revolution. The law of its nature demands a quick decision: either the locomotive drives forward full steam ahead to the most extreme point of the historical ascent, or it rolls back of its own weight again to the starting point at the bottom; and those

¹³³ Ibid.

who would keep it with their weak powers half way up the hill, it drags down with it irredeemably into the abyss.¹³⁴

Nothing could be more foreign to Arendt's thought, or more problematic, given her ideas of the freedom and spontaneity of human action and her concern that automatic natural forces threaten to overwhelm human affairs. But in spite of passages like this, Arendt maintains a deep respect for Luxemburg. She has a certain romantic sympathy for her and an admiration for her passion for politics and her commitment to the public realm. Arendt's political theory remains indebted to Luxemburg and the council communist tradition. Her theory of the council system is, in substance, far more Luxemburgian than the conservative republican leanings of the American tradition. It is evident from the above discussion that Luxemburg's legacy leaves a series of ambiguous traces in Arendt's work. While Arendt's preference for a territorially-based rather than a workplace-based division of councils brings her closer to Jefferson, her support for insurgent and spontaneous political action is more appropriately connected to the revolutionary socialist tradition. Her attempts at wedding the council tradition with a history of republicanism draw Arendt far closer to a Luxemburgian position than many of her interpreters, or perhaps even Arendt herself, would care to admit.

Councils in a Jewish Homeland

During this same period, Arendt's thought was also strongly affected by her involvement in Jewish politics.¹³⁵ From her work with Youth Aliyah in Paris in the 1930s to her political writing in America in the 1940s, Arendt grappled with the possibility of founding a new state in Palestine where her people could establish their homeland.¹³⁶ For Arendt, this state was never to be modelled on the example of the nation-states of Europe, which she so vehemently criticised in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The question of which form this state would take led Arendt to contemplate some of the central practical problems of the operation of political institutions in the modern world. Her preferred option throughout the 1940s, influenced by the writings of Judah Magnes, was the model of a bi-national, federal state composed of local

¹³⁴ Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, 38.

¹³⁵ Benhabib notes that her reflections on the Jewish Question predate her political interest as she was already under the influence of German Zionist leader, Kurt Blumenfeld, when she began writing about Jewish politics. See Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 36.

¹³⁶ For a comprehensive overview of Arendt's political thought during this early period see Iris Pilling, *Denken und Handeln als Jüdin: Hannah Arendts politische Theorie vor 1950* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Land, 1996).

councils in which Arabs and Jews would enjoy equal political and civil rights. Her writings of this period, particularly in the late 1940s, are revealing because they demonstrate that even in the face of the harsh reality of deep disagreement and opposing political forces, Arendt still viewed a federal council system as the most desirable institutional model.

Arendt's first recorded tentative steps towards a federal council system can be found in her trip to Palestine in 1935. Working for Youth Aliyah, Arendt was charged with accompanying a group of students to Palestine on a trip during which she witnessed the operation of Jewish *kibbutzim*. These communities made a great impression on Arendt, who years later described them as "the most promising of all social experiments made in the twentieth century, as well as the most magnificent part of the Jewish homeland."¹³⁷ Young-Bruehl states that Arendt "praised the new communities she had visited" as "she saw in these communities political experiments she admired and supported."¹³⁸ The *kibbutzim* are local, democratic and egalitarian communities of individuals who live and work together with strong elements of socialist and Zionist ideology. Although these were on a relatively small-scale, the *kibbutzim* were attempts at an alternative model of social and political organisation. The particular conditions under which they gestated allowed them to "realize new laws ... new institutions," since they were "unhampered by any government" and "undisturbed by the more noxious ideologies of our times."¹³⁹ A decade on, Arendt continued to see political possibilities in these institutions, arguing that they were not simply of local significance, but may well offer "hope of solutions that will be acceptable and applicable" to "the large mass of men everywhere whose dignity and very humanity are in our time so seriously threatened by the pressures of modern life and its unsolved problems."¹⁴⁰ Even amidst the darkness of the Second World War and the continuing dangers of totalitarianism, Arendt viewed the *kibbutzim* as pointing towards the principles and outlines of an alternative form of political life.

However, Arendt also expressed doubts about the many shortcomings of these communities. Her major criticism related to their inwardness, closure and lack of interest in international politics or the broader struggle of their people. She argued that the pioneers were "completely content within the small circle where they could realize their ideals for themselves" and did

¹³⁷ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 395.

¹³⁸ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 139.

¹³⁹ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 395.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

not attempt to influence Jewish politics or do anything to prevent the growing waves of Jewish terrorism against the local Arab population.¹⁴¹ In a letter to Mary McCarthy, Arendt recalls her “first reaction” to the *kibbutzim*: they were “a new aristocracy” who were too pure for the messy reality of politics. They preferred to work towards their lofty ideals within small utopian communities, remaining oblivious to the broader political landscape.¹⁴² In a more pessimistic mindset she chastises the “unpolitical character of the new movement” and laments their failure to translate social transformation into political gains.¹⁴³ Yet, when searching for political alternatives, she still retains much admiration and respect for the unrealised possibilities of what the *kibbutzim* could have achieved if implemented on a larger scale and with a more politically minded ideology.

Upon migrating to the United States in 1941, Arendt attempted to influence the direction of Jewish politics through her numerous essays and columns. In two important essays of the period, “Zionism Reconsidered” and “To Save the Jewish Homeland,” Arendt considered the possible forms in which the Jewish people could organise their collective political existence. The most important influence on this aspect of Arendt’s work were the efforts of Judah Magnes, an American Jew and President of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who worked tirelessly towards greater Jewish and Arab understanding and peace in the region. Magnes’ essay, “Toward Peace in Palestine,” published in January 1943 in *Foreign Affairs*, struck a chord with Arendt’s conception of the Palestinian problem.¹⁴⁴ Magnes proposed a bi-national solution to the conflict whereby the competing claims of a specifically Jewish or Arab Palestine were both rejected in favour of a confederation in which both people would enjoy complete civil and political equality. The cornerstone of this proposal was a series of associated economic and political federations beginning with a bi-national Palestine and extending up to a union of Arab nations, and finally, an agreement between this union and an Anglo-American union as part of a greater association of free nations. Magnes remained a minority voice on the issue and his Ikhud Party, founded in August 1942 in Palestine, failed to have a significant influence on the direction of Jewish politics. Arendt approved of Magnes’ rejection of nineteenth century ideals of nationalism and the nation-state but thought that his

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 349–350.

¹⁴² Arendt, letter to Mary McCarthy, 7 October 1967, quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 139.

¹⁴³ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 349.

¹⁴⁴ However, Arendt’s support for a federal model predates her reading of this essay. She states in a private letter to Erich Cohn-Bendit in the summer of 1940 that “our only chance – indeed the only chance of all small peoples – lies in a new European federal system.” Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 130.

idea of an agreement with an Anglo-American alliance and an imposed solution by the United States were politically problematic.¹⁴⁵ The establishment of a Jewish state against the will of the Arab population in the region would make it impossible for the state to continue to exist without a large amount of ongoing political and financial support from abroad, which would most likely lead to conflict and war.¹⁴⁶

In “Zionism Reconsidered” Arendt asserts that with the decline of the nation-state the political organisation of the Jewish people will likely be a choice between federations and empires.¹⁴⁷ The former, Arendt believed, is the only real option that avoids a possible resurgence of the dangers of imperialism and gives small peoples like the Jews “a reasonably fair chance for survival.”¹⁴⁸ In this essay, Arendt connects the idea of federalism with the political structure of the United States and argues that it represents a different political model than the European system of nation-states. For this reason, Arendt believed that the influence of American Jews would be essential for the survival of the Jewish people and would avoid the dominance of a petty nationalism in the emigrants to Palestine. In her influential study of Arendt, Margaret Canovan argues that Arendt’s interest in the American Founding Fathers can be dated to at least 1955.¹⁴⁹ It is likely that the importance of the principle of federalism emerges even earlier, in the early 1940s, through her reflections on the rise of imperialist and totalitarian elements in Western politics and in her considerations of the future political organisation of a Jewish commonwealth.¹⁵⁰ After reading Magnes’ article on a solution to the Palestinian problem, Arendt traced the federal principle back to the writings of James Madison who saw it naturally arising in pre-revolutionary America and believed it to be crucial for the foundation of large republics. The influence of the American federal political tradition became important to Magnes’ and Arendt’s reflections on the possibilities for Palestine, to such a degree that in a 1948 article for *Commentary*, Magnes came to call the

¹⁴⁵ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 226.

¹⁴⁶ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 373.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 371.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 145.

¹⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (2nd ed.) (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1951) 126–128. Arendt also read the writings of the American Framers for her American citizenship exam in December 1951. Richard H. King, *Arendt and America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015) 80. Interestingly, Arendt also associates the concept of federalism with the French resistance movement. In a 1945 article Arendt argues that “only the French underground has gone so far as to state that a federative structure of Europe must be based on similarly federated structures in the constituent states.” Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994) 119.

proposed confederation the “United States of Palestine.”¹⁵¹ It is in this period that one can trace the origins of the significance of federalism for Arendt’s conception of a federal council system.

Arendt’s most sustained reflections on the political form of a Jewish commonwealth are found in her 1948 article, “To Save the Jewish Homeland,” written following the declaration of the state of Israel by the United Nations. She supports Magnes’ model of a federal state as the most preferable solution, but adds to this one crucial ingredient: local councils. These councils, modelled on the twentieth century workers’ councils of Luxemburg’s era and the Jewish *kibbutzim* already existing in Palestine, are Arendt’s main contribution to Magnes’ proposal. Arendt argues that “a federated structure, moreover, would have to rest on Jewish-Arab community councils, which would mean that the Jewish-Arab conflict would be resolved on the lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighborliness.”¹⁵² Arendt emphasises the benefits of decentralisation, community participation in public affairs and bottom-up forms of political organisation. These institutions create conditions on the ground for greater co-operation and a reduction of feelings of mutual hostility and suspicion. To this she adds: “a federated state, finally, could be the natural stepping-stone for any later, greater federated structure in the Near East and the Mediterranean area.”¹⁵³ Agreeing with Magnes’ earlier suggestion, Arendt envisions a Palestinian federal political body as forming part of a broader network of associations, moving up to a regional and finally to an international level.¹⁵⁴ She concurs with Magnes’ life-long belief in the importance of the intermingling and co-operation of Arab and Jewish communities in Palestine and imagines that community councils could provide a practical means by which such co-operation could be carried out. As her final of five key “axioms” for a solution to the conflict, Arendt recommends that “local self-government and mixed Jewish-Arab municipal and rural councils, on a small scale and as numerous as possible, are the only realistic political measures that can eventually lead to the political emancipation of Palestine.”¹⁵⁵ Arendt places great weight on the political possibilities inherent in the local council form. Her proposition anticipates her later emphasis

¹⁵¹ Judah Magnes, “For a Jewish-Arab Confederation,” *Commentary* (October 1948), published in Arthur A. Goren (ed.), *Dissenter in Zion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) 511.

¹⁵² Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 400.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ See Anthony F. Lang, Jr. and John Williams (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations: Reading Across the Lines* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁵⁵ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 401.

of Jefferson's proposal to divide the American republic into wards in order to ensure the political freedom of its citizens.¹⁵⁶

Arendt worked in close collaboration with Judah Magnes during 1948, serving as the chairperson of an American organisation established by Magnes for lobbying American politicians and the United Nations.¹⁵⁷ But after the assassination by Israeli terrorists of the UN mediator in Palestine, Count Bernadotte, and the shock of Magnes' death on 27 October 1948, Arendt's involvement in Jewish politics greatly diminished. She noted that she had neither the inclinations nor the abilities of a political actor. At this point, Arendt also witnessed the swift decline of the possibility of anything like a bi-national or federal state in Palestine.¹⁵⁸ Her writings on a council system during this period remain important because they demonstrate how, at a crucial period in the development of Palestinian politics, Arendt held out the council system as a practical alternative to the principle of state sovereignty and partition. Local, participatory and radically democratic experiments in Palestine were the kernel from which larger political institutions were imagined – designed as serious alternatives in a complex and divided modern world.

Totalitarianism and The Councils: Two New Forms of Government

Arendt's withdrawal from political action coincided roughly with the publication of her first and still most widely read and controversial book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. At the time of its writing in the late 1940s, Arendt was considering a number of interrelated sets of problems: on the one hand, how could the atrocities of totalitarian rule have arisen through the crystallisation of certain underground elements of Western civilisation? On the other, what principles and institutions would be able to guide a shattered world in the wake of such calamity and disaster? As a work primarily concerned with the former question, *Origins* can be read in a very bleak light. Arendt came to the conclusion that totalitarianism, which included both Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, constituted a new form of government, distinct from every other in the tradition of Western political thought. This new form of government found its essence in the use of terror embodied in concentration camps and relied

¹⁵⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 253.

¹⁵⁷ Goren (ed.), *Dissenter in Zion*, 463.

¹⁵⁸ Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 306.

upon ideology as a total explanation of reality according to supposedly logical and scientific laws. Critics have viewed the book as a one-sided criticism and rejection of the political institutions of modernity. Sheldon Wolin points to her focus on the subterranean tendencies of modern politics that developed into anti-Semitism, imperialism and totalitarian movements and her lack of any references to democracy as evidence of her bias.¹⁵⁹ However, Arendt did not have a completely negative or deterministic view of modernity. The persistence of a belief in new approaches to politics is visible in Arendt's statement in the preface of *Origins* that:

human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities.¹⁶⁰

This was not a utopian yearning, but the statement of a practical dilemma of someone who valued “balanced judgment and measured insight” over the twin dangers of “reckless optimism and reckless despair.”¹⁶¹ Her reflections on the failures of the nation-state and the party system do not lead to an anti-modern or an anti-democratic position. It may appear that Arendt perceives totalitarianism to be the only novel and unprecedented political form of organisation of the twentieth century. But her examination of totalitarianism, particularly in her additional final chapter, “Ideology and Terror,” points to another possibility: a second novel form of government, which, in certain key respects, is the inverse of totalitarian rule.¹⁶² There is a peculiar connection between the two forms of government, since Arendt will later argue that the councils are the supreme antidote to the potential of totalitarian rule. She argues that the councils are “the best instruments, for example, for breaking up the modern mass society, with its dangerous tendency toward the formation of pseudo-political mass movements.”¹⁶³ In the early 1950s, then, through her analysis of the political logic of totalitarianism, Arendt retained an implicit image of another political possibility: the council system. This remains the case even if at this time she thought that its failure to gain traction anywhere in the world after the war meant that it was no longer a realistic prospect. That Arendt had this clearly in view is demonstrated by a passage from *The Human Condition*:

¹⁵⁹ Wolin, “Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political,” 3.

¹⁶⁰ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ix.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁶² Arendt makes this point clear in a final chapter added first to the German translation in 1955, and then to all subsequent English editions, entitled “Ideologie und Terror: Eine Neue Staatsform”.

¹⁶³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 271.

What is so easily overlooked by the modern historian who faces the rise of totalitarian systems, especially when he deals with developments in the Soviet Union, is that just as the modern masses and their leaders succeeded, at least temporarily, in bringing forth in totalitarianism an authentic, albeit all-destructive, new form of government, thus the people's revolutions, for more than a hundred years now, have come forth, albeit never successfully, with another new form of government: the system of people's councils to take the place of the Continental party system, which, one is tempted to say, was discredited even before it came into existence.¹⁶⁴

The event that completely reoriented Arendt's politics and made her reconsider the potential of the council system was the appearance of councils in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The sudden emergence of this form of government filled Arendt with "a certain hopefulness" that made her question whether "the *only* clear expression of the present age's problems up to date has been the horror of totalitarianism."¹⁶⁵ The extraordinary courage of the Hungarian citizens and the persistence of the political form of the councils reignited the practical possibilities of a functioning council system. The history of the publication of *Origins* reveals Arendt's trajectory. While the councils were completely absent from the first edition of 1951, an epilogue on the councils of the Hungarian Revolution was added to the second English edition in 1958. However, this was later removed from all future editions, since Arendt soon realised that her work on the council system did not constitute merely an addendum to her analysis of totalitarianism. Rather, it was the beginning of an entirely new project, one that she finally completed in 1963 with *On Revolution*.

Despite its focus on the nature of totalitarianism, Arendt's final chapter of *Origins* sheds much light on her conception of a council system. One of the central themes of Arendt's analysis is the way in which different regimes embody a particular relationship between movement and stability, and action and laws. The fundamental problem of totalitarian governments is not their lawless or arbitrary nature, but the fact that they subordinate the entirety of human life to the supposed movement of the laws of Nature or History. Arendt highlights that totalitarianism is not tyranny in the traditional sense of the term because there is no arbitrary will of a dictator that animates the regime. Totalitarianism defies traditional modes of understanding government not because of its lawless nature, but because it understands law as a force that must be unleashed on the world. One of the first tasks of totalitarian governments is to remove the hindrances and boundaries of laws that provide a

¹⁶⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 216.

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 201–202.

space for action and establish both boundaries and channels of communication between human beings. Political space is already in danger as it is continually invaded by the birth of new citizens and threatened by the boundlessness and potentially destructive dimensions of human action. There is an unusual parallel between totalitarian movements and human action insofar as they both represent a limitless, unending and potentially uncontrollable movement that is threatening and transgressive. But in spite of their similarities, Arendt distinguishes between the automatic, metabolic and seemingly natural movement of totalitarian government and the free, spontaneous and eruptive movement of human action. At certain moments, the two are even set as opposites. Arendt states that it is only the unconstrained capacity of action to start a “new beginning” that can hinder and prevent the supra-human force of totalitarianism.¹⁶⁶ Terror will always attempt to destroy spaces of freedom where action can appear as it views its unpredictable and untameable nature as an obstacle to total domination.

It is here that Arendt’s implicit analysis of the council system, as the institution of human action *par excellence*, becomes apparent. If totalitarianism reduces all man-made laws to an unstoppable movement of natural forces, then the council system would retain the institutional integrity of such laws as a means of preserving an open space for political action. The principle of movement that animates a council system is not an automatic force but the continual striving of its citizens for freedom. Arendt argues that “the stability of the laws corresponds to the constant motion of all human affairs” in the same way in which she will later argue that the institutional structure of the council system corresponds to the spontaneous nature of human action.¹⁶⁷ Whereas totalitarian regimes attempt to constrict space and reduce humanity to “One Man [of] gigantic dimensions,” the council system institutionalises a public realm where plural human beings can coexist in their differences and retain their capacity for independent action.¹⁶⁸ The council system is more than merely lawful government or a constitutional guarantee of negative liberties. Lawful government without the proper institutionalisation of a space for political action and participation in government in which citizens would be inspired by a “love for freedom” would amount to “the banishment of the citizens from the public realm.”¹⁶⁹ Limited, constitutional government is in itself insufficient to establish a free republic. Unlike the council system, many other forms of democracy based on the tradition of the nation-state and the party system fail to preserve an

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 465.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 466.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 221.

open institutional space for the free political action of their citizens and become sterile systems run by bureaucrats and political parties. The council system is the only modern form of government that combines the stability of a lawful government with the principle of freedom as that which inspires its citizens.

The Labour Movement

Following from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the influence of the council system can be traced to Arendt's next major published work, *The Human Condition*. Arendt's one and only reference to the council system in *The Human Condition* presents an interesting paradox, which can be explicated through an examination of the architecture of the text. The reference is situated within a chapter entitled "The Labour Movement," which itself is located in a most unusual place – at the heart of Arendt's section on action. In a book in which one of Arendt's main tasks is to distinguish between the "three fundamental human activities: labour, work and action," why would Arendt place a chapter on the labour movement at the centre of her discussion of action?¹⁷⁰ The chapter on the labour movement (and the one before it on *homo faber*) marks the point at which the text folds back on itself. Here, Arendt confronts the dependence and interrelationship of the three concepts by retracing the progression of the text and returning, first to work, and finally to labour, before continuing her analysis of action. The problem is that far from seamlessly continuing her examination of action, Arendt is forced into a bind by attempting to extricate the social and economic functions of the labour movement from its political legacy.

By the time Arendt reaches the chapter on the labour movement she has already demonstrated the intimate connections between work and action through the dependence of the actor on *homo faber* for both the construction of the stability of a common world of things and for the remembrance of action in works of art. *Animal laborans*, on the other hand, is granted no such distinctions. Whereas the activities of *homo faber* are connected to the public space of appearances and are at worst merely "unpolitical," labouring is described as outright "antipolitical" and destructive of the political qualities of identity, plurality and political community.¹⁷¹ The opening paragraphs of the chapter rehearse Arendt's phenomenological

¹⁷⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

analysis of labouring. She describes it as essentially an isolating activity that creates a “sameness” and a “loss of identity” amongst workers and which stands with life and death as “non-worldly, antipolitical, truly transcendent experiences.”¹⁷² The question is, then, why at this point in the text must Arendt return to the concept of labour, only to repeat an analysis already seen that offers no new insights as to labour’s possible connection to action? The answer appears in the following paragraph. It is due to the “extraordinarily productive role which the labor movements have played in modern politics,” one in which the “European working class” wrote “one of the most glorious and probably the most promising chapter of recent history.”¹⁷³ In short, because of the council system – her most celebrated institutional realisation of political action in the modern world. The contradiction that Arendt is forced to confront is that throughout its history this institution has been enacted primarily by labourers for the purpose (at least in part) of organising labour. Arendt’s attempted solution to what she euphemistically names, this “discrepancy,” goes to the core of her political theory.

Arendt’s strategy is to untangle two different trends of the working class and to divide them into distinct moments. Although Arendt concedes that “the line between political and economic demands, between political organizations and trade unions, was blurred enough,” she states that a distinction can still be made and that “the two should not be confused.”¹⁷⁴ Her breakdown of the various differences is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Two trends of the working class

Element	Political	Economic
Members	The people as a whole (not restricted to members of the working class)	Members of the working class
Interests	The people’s political aspirations	Interests of the working class
Organisation type	Unguided citizens who form political organisations/ political parties (some of the time)	Trade unions/ political parties (most of the time)
Mode of politics	Revolutionary: transformation of political institutions and foundation of a new public space with new political	Reformist: seek incorporation into society, social prestige and wage increases etc.

¹⁷² Ibid., 215.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 215–216.

	standards	
Political system	People's councils	Continental party system
Fate	Historically defeated (but the Hungarian Revolution demonstrates that the élan has not yet died)	Historically victorious

Arendt's discussion of these two trends suggests a clear and distinct separation between two moments that must be held apart. There is a steadfast division throughout most of Arendt's work between what she considered properly political concerns and social or economic issues. As a result, her attempt to separate two trends of the working class can be mapped on to the distinction between the social and the political in both *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*. This raises one of the fundamental problems that scholars have found with Arendt's political ontology: it appears to require a division between a realm of freedom and a realm of necessity through the elimination of the pursuit of social welfare from the sphere of politics.¹⁷⁵ It is difficult for Arendt's supporters to avoid some version of this claim, since she argues that the very idea of attempting to liberate people from poverty by political means is misguided and dangerous.¹⁷⁶ There are points at which she gestures towards less radical positions, such as where she notes that "the dividing line between the two [trends of the working class] is not a matter of extreme social and economic demands but solely on the proposition of a new form of government."¹⁷⁷ To read Arendt charitably, one could argue that it is not the presence of economic demands within a movement, whether reformist or radical, but rather the manifestation of a distinctive political program that aims at a fundamental transformation of the political institutions of a state that is decisive. It could be argued that economic demands and a general reorganisation of the economy can accompany political reforms so long as the vital political aspect remains the guiding ideal.

However, Arendt's characteristic separation of the social and the political reasserts itself in her discussion of the councils, which provides a paradigmatic case of her attempt at a

¹⁷⁵ Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," 15; Richard J. Bernstein, "Hannah Arendt: The Ambiguities of Theory and Practice," in *Political Theory and Praxis: New Perspectives*, Terrence Ball ed., (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1977) 141–158; Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*. For an attempt to push back against the dominant reading of Arendt as attempting to purify politics of socio-economic concerns and an argument for the importance of economic matters for public life in Arendt's work see Steven Klein, "'Fit to Enter the World': Hannah Arendt on Politics, Economics and the Welfare State," *American Political Science Review* (2014) 108 (4), 856–869.

¹⁷⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 58.

¹⁷⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 216.

fundamental division. In her discussion of the labour movement the dominant line of argument endeavours to minimise the class aspects of the movement. She argues the labour movement “was never restricted to the ranks of the working class” and could “represent the people as a whole.”¹⁷⁸ In what amounts to an extremely tenuous position, Arendt praises the achievements of the “political labor movement” while simultaneously denying that this was based on the organisation of a particular class of the population. At first glance, Arendt’s claim that the labour movement could represent the people as a whole could be read as reflecting the young Marx’s argument that the proletariat was a universal class insofar as its emancipation would usher in the end of class society. However, Arendt’s position is anything but Marxist. Rather than beginning with a class analysis of society in order to reveal capitalism’s contradictions and the possibility of its overcoming, Arendt bypasses any reference to class in order to argue for the institution of radically democratic councils open to all citizens.

These tensions come to the fore in Arendt’s account of the Hungarian Revolution. Arendt’s brief comments on Hungary in the chapter on the labour movement in *The Human Condition* are based on an extended analysis that appeared the same year in an article entitled “Totalitarian Imperialism.”¹⁷⁹ In spite of its failure, the Revolution was for Arendt a “true event.”¹⁸⁰ The uprisings were completely unexpected and seemed to embody Luxemburg’s concept of a spontaneous revolution, an autonomously organised rebellion of an oppressed people without the leadership of political parties or trade unions. Arendt notes how quickly and efficiently the country organised itself into a council system, with a plan for a co-ordinating national revolutionary council already underway within a matter of days.¹⁸¹ A particularly striking aspect of Arendt’s article is her appeal to the “events themselves” rather than “historical trends” or “questionnaires and motivation research” as that which should guide an understanding of politics.¹⁸² This appeal to what Arendt elsewhere refers to as “factual truth” or the “brutally elementary data” of human events sits uneasily at the beginning of what could only be described as a very Arendtian narration of events.¹⁸³ Arendt’s analysis of Hungary mirrors, in certain respects, her reading of Luxemburg. In this article, Arendt admits that the council system “had been almost a monopoly of the working class,” but that it was Hungary that stood out as an instance where class divisions and labour

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 219.

¹⁷⁹ Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution”.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸¹ The United Nations, *Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary* (New York, 1957) 154.

¹⁸² Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” 8.

¹⁸³ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1961) 239.

did not play a primary role.¹⁸⁴ Putting to one side Arendt's reversal over her claims about the non-economic nature of the councils, this is a misleading statement on the Hungarian Revolution, which misrepresents the intentions and actions of the Hungarian revolutionaries.

Arendt argues that the council system that arose spontaneously following the outbreak of the revolution was naturally divided into two forms of councils: the Revolutionary Councils, charged with political tasks, and the Workers' Councils, which were to manage economic affairs. She shows little interest in the latter and focuses her attention on what she views as the more important of the two. In spite of the extensive evidence of the combined economic and political demands of the Hungarian people as documented in their manifestos, flyers and declarations, Arendt claims that the revolutionaries' motives were "exclusively Freedom and Truth" and that they were not driven by material interests.¹⁸⁵ To support this claim Arendt refers to a quote in the "truly admirable" United Nations' "Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary." However, the central conclusion of the UN Report is that the councils' "chief purpose was to ensure for the Hungarian people real, and not merely nominal, control of local government and of factories, mines, and other industrial enterprises."¹⁸⁶ It states that the emergence of the councils represented the "first practical step to restore order and to reorganize the Hungarian economy on a socialist basis."¹⁸⁷ The numerous political declarations and policies of Hungarian groups annexed to the report document the broad economic demands of the councils and their concern for both new political institutions and a restructuring of workplaces. Arendt's curt dismissal of the Workers' Councils is unjustified. Her doubt that it would even be "possible to run factories under the management and ownership of the workers" flies in the face of countless historical examples of their success.¹⁸⁸ Arendt ultimately fails to convincingly separate these two trends and enforce her social/political binary on the council system. Her fluctuating approach highlights the weakness of her position: at one point claiming the councils were not concerned with social welfare or economic activities, while at another stating that *if* they were, it failed miserably.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 219.

¹⁸⁵ Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," 23.

¹⁸⁶ United Nations, *Report of the Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary*, 154.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸⁸ Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," 29. Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Hannah Arendt on Revolution," in *Revolutionaries* (New York: Meridian Books, 1973) 207. For a recent collection of studies on workers' control of factories see Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).

¹⁸⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 219; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 265.

In this sense, her encounter with the councils highlights the untenable nature of her strict distinction between the social and the political.

The Lost Treasure of the Council System

The extraordinary events of the Hungarian Revolution forged new connections in Arendt's mind and produced a ferment from which emerged a larger and more ambitious project: Arendt aimed to write *the* theory of the council system. The scope and complexity of Arendt's undertaking is seldom acknowledged by her commentators. It is entwined within a number of overlapping ideas in *On Revolution* and overshadowed by her controversial distinction between the social concerns of the French Revolution and the political nature of the American Revolution. If the Jacobin revolutionary tradition of the party system finds its most lucid and influential theorist in Karl Marx, then the lost treasure of the council system must be brought back from the depths and given a clear theoretical articulation by Arendt herself. Arendt's project is one of both recollection and invention as she constructs a tradition that she argues, as an historical fact, has never really existed. For Arendt, the council system is the forgotten institutional framework of modern politics, immediately overtaken by the party system and ruthlessly stamped out whenever it arose during revolutions and uprisings. Arendt's realisation of the continued relevance of the council system gives rise to a desire to narrate the history of their struggle. The true tragedy of the councils is that their failure to be institutionalised is immediately followed by their erasure from memory and eclipse by other political ideas. This process is aided by the fact that the councils have not had their basic political principles and concepts adequately theorised. For Arendt, it is only through the digestion of political events in conceptual form that political accomplishments can be passed down to the next generation. She considered it important to translate the experience of the "revolutionary spirit" into "the less direct but more articulate language of political thought."¹⁹⁰ Writing the tradition of the council system from its birth in the modern concepts of revolution and freedom is, for Arendt, the crowning achievement of *On Revolution* and the culmination of her political thought of the 1950s.

¹⁹⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 165.

Arendt is encouraged by the seeming naturalness, spontaneity and persistence of the council form. She frequently remarks on the similarities and striking resemblances of various councils across history that arose in completely different contexts and with little to no knowledge of one another. There is “no tradition” in Arendt’s mind that “can be called to account for the regular emergence and re-emergence of the council system ever since the French Revolution.”¹⁹¹ While this claim is not entirely accurate, it is true that the council system is not a well-known or understood political institution. For Arendt, the councils “sprang up as the spontaneous organs of the people” and made “their appearance in every genuine revolution throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”¹⁹² She argues that because of this re-emergence the institutional outline of the councils seems to correspond to the elementary grammar of political action.¹⁹³ Arendt makes a vague but persistent appeal for a relationship between the institutional form of the councils and an ontological fact of plurality based in the human condition. The repetition of the council form throughout modern history speaks to the natural tendencies of human action when left unhindered by governmental and centralising forces in times of emergency or crisis. She observes that the council system appears to be a natural product of the unconstrained organisational tendencies of plural human beings. In this sense, she grounds her political argument in a weak ontological claim concerning human beings’ natural characteristics and inclinations.

As Arendt restructures her thought in the wake of the Hungarian uprisings, the councils are incorporated into a broader narrative of the fate of political freedom in modernity. Her readings on the American Revolution at the Department of American History and Civilisation at Princeton in 1959 allowed her to extend her frame of reference. The emergence of the councils is traced back to the revolutionary experiences of America and France. She began to see Jefferson’s proposals of a republican ward system and the emergence of popular societies in the French Revolution as anticipating the later appearance of revolutionary councils. For Arendt, the European councils “resembled in an amazing fashion Jefferson’s ward system.”¹⁹⁴ That which first appeared to Arendt as an isolated phenomenon with a few sporadic instances at the beginning of the twentieth-century in Russia and Germany, became a basic experience

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 253.

¹⁹² Ibid., 241.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 189. Although, we should be sceptical of Arendt’s claim that the council system has arisen in every modern revolution. One can point to the examples of India, Algeria and Cuba as counterfactuals to this claim. No doubt Arendt would question whether these examples could be considered as genuine examples of political revolutions that sought to institutionalise political freedom.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 248.

intrinsic to modern politics. Though rarely actualised, the possibility of the council form arises simultaneously with the modern experiences of revolution and political freedom. The Hungarian Revolution taught Arendt that revolution was not only a “new experience that revealed man’s capacity for novelty,” but that it was also the natural birthplace of the council system.¹⁹⁵ Arendt mentions the “intimate connection between the spirit of revolution and the principle of federation” and argues that “the councils, as distinguished from parties, have always emerged during the revolution itself, they sprang from the people as spontaneous organs of action and order.”¹⁹⁶ The ultimate aim of political revolutions for Arendt is the constitution of a space of freedom that is embodied in the council system. While the history of modern politics is conventionally told as a struggle between the competing ideologies of liberalism, socialism and conservatism, from Arendt’s standpoint, it can be presented as:

the conflict between the modern party system and the new revolutionary organs of self-government. These two systems, so utterly unlike and even contradictory to each other, were born at the same moment. The spectacular success of the party system and the no less spectacular failure of the council system were both due to the rise of the nation-state, which elevated the one and crushed the other, whereby the leftist and revolutionary parties have shown themselves to be no less hostile to the council system than the conservative or reactionary right.¹⁹⁷

Every modern revolution for Arendt can be viewed from the perspective of the struggle between the spontaneous development of the council system and the imposition of a party system by established powers. Arendt views liberalism and Marxism – representative parliamentary democracy and revolutionary political parties – as two sides of the same coin. The true conflict of modern politics is not between liberals and conservatives, but between the people and those who claim to represent them, be it a parliamentary body or a vanguard party.

Arendt’s dramatic reshaping of the history of modern politics is intriguing, although not entirely convincing. A number of readers have been sceptical of Arendt’s methodology, taking umbrage at her odd mixture of history, biography and fable.¹⁹⁸ First, there is the question of historical accuracy. There is a tendency within some Arendt scholarship to claim

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 258, 263.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 239.

¹⁹⁸ Hobsbawm, “Hannah Arendt on Revolution,” in *Revolutionaries*, 201–208; Shklar, “Hannah Arendt as Pariah,” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*; Disch, “How could Hannah Arendt Glorify the American Revolution and Revile the French? Placing *On Revolution* in the Historiography of the French and American Revolutions”; Cf. James Miller, “The Pathos of Novelty: Hannah Arendt’s Image of Freedom in the Modern World,” in Hill (ed.) *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 177–208.

that since Arendt was not attempting to write a historian's account of events, the historical accuracy of her narratives is somehow beside the point.¹⁹⁹ I find this interpretation question-begging. Arendt draws extensively from historical material and frequently makes relatively straightforward claims about historical events, several of which in the case of the councils are plain wrong. Arendt's epic narrative of the struggle between the party and council system throughout modernity overlooks the fact that the party system was largely unknown prior to 1850, and that the councils arose predominantly in the early twentieth century, following the collapse of imperial powers during the First World War.²⁰⁰ At other points, such as her account of the Hungarian revolution or her denial of the economic role of the councils and their socialist roots, Arendt systematically distorts historical evidence to fit her own argument. One of her most scathing critics, Eric Hobsbawm, admonishes Arendt for her lack of commitment to historical evidence and her creative use of the past, locating her style in the "vague terrain which lies between literature, psychology, and what, for want of a better word, is called social prophecy."²⁰¹ From the perspective of standard practices in the social sciences, it is undoubted that Arendt leaves much to be desired.

However, Arendt never claimed to be writing traditional historical scholarship, which raises the further issue of how Arendt's efforts could be judged against her own methodological commitments. Of the few scant remarks on her own method, Arendt intimates the necessarily tentative and provisional nature of political inquiry.²⁰² Theories and political concepts must always be reconsidered in light of historical events.²⁰³ This principle forms part of what could be considered Arendt's phenomenological mode of political theory, an attempt to return to the experiences of politics that lie behind the abstractions of theoretical constructs.²⁰⁴ As Canovan remarks, one of the perplexing issues for Arendt's readers is that she combines her phenomenological approach with a "fragmentary historiography," which she inherits from

¹⁹⁹ Kristie M. McClure, "The Odor of Judgment: Exemplarity, Propriety, and Politics in the Company of Hannah Arendt," in Craig J. Calhoun and John McGowan (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997) 53–84.

²⁰⁰ Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 194; Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 6.

²⁰¹ Hobsbawm, "Hannah Arendt on Revolution," in *Revolutionaries*, 202.

²⁰² For a recent attempt to reconstruct Arendt's methodology see Steve Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*. Buckler offers an eloquent defence of Arendt as an engaged political theorist whose writing is experientially sensitive and appropriately adapted to the terrain of politics. He claims Arendt adopts a distinctive voice in her writing that eschews traditional philosophical and historical approaches in order to gain a greater proximity to the contingent and plural nature of political life.

²⁰³ Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," 8.

²⁰⁴ Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 308; Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, "In Heidegger's Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Phenomenological Humanism," *The Review of Politics* (1984) 46 (2), 183–211.

Walter Benjamin.²⁰⁵ In an essay on Benjamin, Arendt alludes to his predilection for collecting aphorisms and fragments, likening his activity to a “pearl diver” who brings to the surface “new crystalized forms and shapes.”²⁰⁶ For Canovan, there is a tension in her work between the need to be true to authentic experiences and a desire to rescue “forgotten treasures” of the past, which may be of use to contemporary politics. The latter method involves a “deliberately arbitrary use of fragments recovered from the past,” which is likely to distort a straightforward portrayal of actors’ political experiences.²⁰⁷ As a result, we can question whether Arendt successfully returns to the “underlying phenomenal reality” of the councils.²⁰⁸ If Arendt’s objection to the tradition of political philosophy was its distortion of the experiences of political actors, then parts of her own enterprise must be judged to have succumbed to a similar fate.²⁰⁹ In the case of the councils, Arendt systematically misrepresents the intentions and actions of the participants of the councils in order to advance her own interpretation.

In spite of these criticisms, there are also strengths of Arendt’s distinctive approach that deserve closer examination. The power of Arendt’s method is based on what Judith Shklar views as Arendt’s “monumental” style of writing history in the Nietzschean sense of retrieving lessons from past acts and events that may be put in service of the present. This style of argument will necessarily entail certain omissions and exaggerations in the retrieval of partially forgotten experiences of politics. Arendt is not interested in history for its own sake that remains stuck in the past. Instead, she intends to intervene in prevailing horizons of thought through a selective and artistic use of historical material in order to highlight certain valuable and praise-worthy historical events. In doing so, Arendt focuses our attention on the irreparable break in the tradition of the modern age and acknowledges the enormous gulf that separates us from the past. Her project is therefore not a simple task of reclamation and renewal. It must first involve a rupturing of our complacency and a shaking of the familiarity of the present. To this effect, the revelation of the distance between a council system and contemporary party politics highlights the failure of current practices to fully realise the

²⁰⁵ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 4. See also Raluca Eddon, “Arendt, Scholem, Benjamin: Between Revolution and Messianism,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (2006) 5 (3), 261–279; Benhabib, “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative”.

²⁰⁶ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 206.

²⁰⁷ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 4.

²⁰⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 15.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

democratic ideals they purport to embody. I explore this aspect of Arendt's project in chapter three in relation to her unique concept of political principles and the council system.

First, however, in the next chapter, I will address the historical inaccuracies of Arendt's interpretation of council democracy. Shklar notes that there is an inevitable tension between Arendt's work and a more critical form of history aimed at recreating "what really went on" in the past. For a critical historian, if Arendt wished to draw on historical events as a way of intervening in the present, her interpretations should be accompanied by a commitment to a faithful account of these events. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt places particular emphasis on the technique of storytelling in order to preserve and relay significant actions and events. But as Quentin Skinner notes, "history (notwithstanding a fashionable attitude among philosophers) cannot simply consist of stories: a further feature of historical stories is that they are at least supposed to be true."²¹⁰ Arendt's account distorts our understanding of the councils and necessitates a more rigorous and historically accurate re-evaluation of the history of the councils, a task that will be undertaken in the next chapter.

²¹⁰ Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* (1969) 8 (1), 3–53, 29.

Chapter 2: The Councils in Historical Context

In the opening pages of the final chapter of *On Revolution*, Arendt announces that she intends to narrate “a strange and sad story that remains to be told.”²¹¹ At this point, Arendt turns from a comparative analysis of the French and American revolutions to provide an account of the democratic councils. She describes the councils as the regular emergence of a new form of government, a spontaneous institution that sprang directly from the peoples’ political activities and posed an alternative to the central institutions of liberal parliamentary democracy. However, a significant limitation of Arendt’s retrieval of the council system is her distorted historical narrative, which severely misrepresents the history of the councils. In reality, Arendt writes what could be described as a mythology rather than a history. In Arendt’s account, the councils are depicted as the ideal institutions for the appearance of freedom in modern societies and the natural result of spontaneous organisational impulses of ordinary citizens. Yet, Arendt addresses few of their internal structural weaknesses and fails to answer possible criticisms and objections. As a result, the councils take on a quasi-mythical character as ideal yet precarious political institutions that appear destined to be overwhelmed by the centralising flows of state power. Responding in an interview to the possibility of a revival of the councils, Arendt bleakly notes the prospects were “very slight, if at all. And yet, perhaps, after all – in the wake of the next revolution.”²¹²

The problem with Arendt’s mythology is that, ultimately, it cuts both ways. On the one hand, the historical rarity of the councils makes them appear unattainable. They occupy an enigmatic position in her writings as an elusive horizon of modern politics, invariably receding from our political vision as a viable institutional form. They seem to embody all that is good and organic in politics, but arise only for fleeting moments before they are crushed by the party system.²¹³ The tragic tone of her interviews further compounds this picture, permitting her readers to assume that the councils were simply an historical curiosity.²¹⁴ On the other hand, her idealised description overlooks the councils’ flaws and loses the historical specificities of their political struggles in the process. Her recovery of council democracy offers valuable insight, but the terms of her analysis tend to obscure as much as they

²¹¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 247.

²¹² Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 189.

²¹³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 263.

²¹⁴ See for example Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 237.

illuminate. The “fabulist” nature of her historical illustrations overwrites rather than contributes to a council tradition. Although Arendt draws from historical examples, her retelling abstracts from the concrete details of the councils’ struggles and positions her interpretation through a lens of preconceived political categories. In misconstruing the actions and intentions of the historical actors, Arendt warps our understanding of the councils.

The distinctive presentation of Arendt’s argument for a council system has also led to a weakness in the treatment of this topic within Arendt scholarship. Commentators have tended to view the final chapter of *On Revolution* as the outline of an abstract theoretical model without due consideration of the historical manifestation of councils.²¹⁵ As a result, many analyses of Arendt’s councils simply repeat her historical errors and remain trapped in the same confusions. This ahistorical approach of many of her interpreters is understandable given Arendt’s denial of a council tradition and her insistence on their “spontaneous” recurrence. These abstractions, however, ignore the extent to which the emergence of councils relied upon a long history of organisation and education of workers preceding the revolutionary outbreaks. To attribute the councils’ repeated appearance to a political naturalism of peoples’ basic tendencies and inclinations neglects the necessary organisational dimension of building and sustaining political movements and institutions. The emergence of councils can only be understood within the context of their development within a highly organised working class. Her critics’ charge of the council system as a utopian schema has more purchase on Arendt’s argument when taken as an abstract model, rather than as an allusion to the historical examples of councils that emerged in Europe in the wake of the First World War. The councils were not utopian blueprints for a future possible society, but practical and strategic organisational forms that arose with little conscious foresight as a response to the immediate needs of the time. Placing them in historical perspective provides a richer historical portrait of the councils and challenges a number of the misrepresentations of Arendt’s account.²¹⁶

Departing from Arendt’s idiosyncratic style, I attempt to foreground historical events in my interpretation of the councils and pay closer attention to the intentions and actions of participants in the political struggle. One limitation of Arendt’s approach is her tendency to

²¹⁵ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 187–300; Cf. McConkey, “On Arendt’s Vision of the European Council Phenomenon: Critique from an Historical Perspective”.

²¹⁶ For another history of the workers’ councils see Alberto R. Bonnet, “The Political Form at Last Discovered: Workers’ Councils against the Capitalist State,” in Ness and Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own*, 66–81.

rely on the “great texts” of the history of political thought to understand political phenomena, rather than basing her arguments on historical facts. Too often in *On Revolution*, references to the political theories of canonical authors are intended to stand in for or provide explanations of actual historical events. For Arendt, Rousseau’s discovery of pity and compassion “anticipates” the instability and terror of the French revolutionary government, while his concept of the *volonté générale* “became axiomatic for all factions and parties of the French Revolution.”²¹⁷ Moreover, the turning point of the French Revolution for Arendt – when the rights of man were transformed into the rights of the *sans-culottes* – can be located in the writings of Marx, “the greatest theorist the revolutions ever had,” whose “enormous impact” can in turn explain the following course of revolutionary history.²¹⁸ In contrast to this form of storytelling in which extraordinary texts serve to illuminate events, I concentrate on the actual practices of individuals and groups within the councils and attempt to understand these practices with reference to the actors’ declared intentions and ideologies. As a result, my research encompasses a broader scope of ordinary, mundane historical material: manifestos, pamphlets, declarations, minutes and other historical evidence that sheds light on the period.

The two most prominent examples of councils to emerge in Europe were those of Russia and Germany in the period 1917–1919. Councils also appeared in other countries such as Austria, Italy and Hungary, but attention in this chapter will be given to the two largest and most prominent cases. I also concentrate on events that transpired in each capital city, which were the locus points for the development of the councils.²¹⁹ A historical examination of their political struggles offers two case studies of the possibilities and dangers of council democracy. Germany was viewed by European revolutionaries at the time as the most likely country to instigate an international socialist revolution. It was the most advanced industrial nation with a highly organised labour force and a long history of revolutionary politics. However, to the surprise of many, it was the relatively under-developed Russia that first formed councils and eventually incorporated them into a council state. Although there is much historical scholarship on the councils, they usually figure only briefly as part of more general studies.²²⁰ In spite of a revival in the 1960s, there has been relatively little recent work

²¹⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 67, 147.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

²¹⁹ Berlin, for example, consistently had the highest number of strikes in all of Germany and was the heart of the German labour movement. Hans Manfred Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus von 1918–1923* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1969) 82.

²²⁰ There are a number of good early German studies on the councils dating from the 1920s. See Franz Gutmann, *Das Rätesystem: Seine Verfechter und seine Probleme* (München: Drei Masken Verlag, 1922); Otto Seeling, *Der*

in Anglophone scholarship on the role that the councils played in this important turning point in world history.²²¹

One reason for this neglect of the councils is that within certain traditional historical approaches the story of the councils has been lost between the cracks of social democracy and Marxism-Leninism. On the one hand, the German councils have typically been portrayed as representing the chaos and disorder before the emergence of stable liberal democratic institutions. Traditional West German historiography dismisses the period of the councils as a dangerous flirtation with Bolshevism on the path to liberal democracy.²²² In the interpretation of Karl Erdman, representative of this earlier West German approach, the councils embodied a radical Bolshevik ideology of council dictatorship, which was only avoided through the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party towards parliamentary democracy.²²³ Similarly, in scholarship on the Russian Revolution, the story of the soviets in the early phases of the Russian Revolution tended to be overshadowed by the larger framework of the Bolshevik takeover and the creation of a one-party state, such that it was difficult to discern what was unique or distinctive about the councils themselves.²²⁴ Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, the councils were represented as the admirable but ultimately temporary organs of the working class that would eventually be replaced by the superior knowledge and organisation of the party. A more balanced assessment of the role of the councils was hindered in the

Rätegedanke und seine Verwirklichung in Sowjetrussland (Berlin: Pyramidenverl, 1925); Richard Müller, *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik* (Wien: Malik, 1924–1925); Eduard Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution von 1918/19. Geschichte der Entstehung und ersten Arbeitsperiode der deutschen Republik* (Berlin: Verlag für Gesellschaft und Erziehung, 1921). See also Walter Tormin, *Zwischen Räterediktatur und Sozialer Demokratie: Die Geschichte der Rätebewegung in der deutschen Revolution 1918/19* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1954); Martin Buber, *Pfade in Utopia* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1950); Lindemann, *The Red Years: European Socialism Versus Bolshevism, 1919–1921*; Volker Arnold, *Rätebewegung und Rätetheorien in der Novemberrevolution* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1985); For an extensive but now dated bibliography on the council movement see Udo Bernbach (ed.), *Theorie und Praxis der direkten Demokratie: Texte und Materialien zur Räte-Diskussion* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1973).

²²¹ For recent work see Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*; Ralf Hoffrogge, “From Unionism to Workers’ Councils – The Revolutionary Shop Stewards in Germany 1914–1918,” in Ness and Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own*, 84–103; Donny Gluckstein, *The Western Soviets: Workers Councils versus Parliament, 1915–1920* (London: Bookmarks, 1985); Dietmar Lange, *Massenstreik und Schießbefehl – Generalstreik und Märzkämpfe in Berlin 1919* (Berlin: Edition Assemblage, 2012); Karl Christian Führer, Jürgen Mittag, Axel Schildt and Klaus Tenfelde (eds.), *Revolution und Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland 1918–1920* (Essen: Klartext, 2013).

²²² See Heinrich August Winkler, *Germany: The Long Road West. Vol. 1: 1789–1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²²³ Karl Dietrich Erdmann, “Die Geschichte der Weimarer Republik als Problem der Wissenschaft,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (1955) 3, 1–19.

²²⁴ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 5.

former soviet states by prejudice arising from Lenin's attack on council communist tendencies in his "'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder."²²⁵

A re-examination of the two cases of Russia and Germany provides several crucial modifications to Arendt's narrative.²²⁶ The councils emerge as a more defined and historically restricted institution that develops predominantly in the period immediately following the First World War. The historical periodisation of the councils alters from a time span that stretched back to the French Revolution into one that is, in essence, only a few short years. This also prompts reconsideration of the councils' basic structure and form. While Arendt presents the councils as a new form of government, they operated more frequently as oppositional institutions that sought to control and regulate governing bodies and further the aims of the revolutionary movement. On this point, however, there has been significant disagreement, since a number of different perspectives existed at the time regarding the proper structure and roles of the councils. These disagreements will be discussed below. A third difference between Arendt's analysis and the historical evidence of the councils concerns their economic activities and essential class composition. The councils undertook extensive economic planning and social welfare activities and sought to democratise workplaces and barracks. They were considered by most participants to be institutions that represented the interests of workers, rather than as universal or class-neutral organisations. Fourth, it is untenable for Arendt to draw a strict distinction between the councils and political parties because the conflicts within the councils were organised through existing parties rather than in opposition to them.

Arendt provides an important starting point for understanding the nature of the councils, but the limitations of her approach necessitate a revised historical narrative in order to reclaim the lost significance of the councils for contemporary politics. In this chapter, I will limit discussion to how a re-evaluation of the history of the councils provides a modified perspective on Arendt's argument for a council democracy. This historical research will lay the groundwork for a theorisation of the possible resources provided by the democratic practices of council delegates. In chapter five, I will further develop this analysis and examine

²²⁵ Vladimir I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder," in Vladimir I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 31 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965) 17–118.

²²⁶ I follow the more recent trend of scholars such as Sabine Roß and Ralf Hoffrogge who avoid placing the councils in the simplistic alternative between liberal democracy and council dictatorship. See Sabine Roß, *Biographisches Handbuch der Reichsrätekonferenzen 1918/1919* (Düsseldorf, Droste Verlag, 2000); Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*.

the precise sense in which the councils may be held to have significance for contemporary political practices.

Situating the Councils

The first councils appeared in Russia in 1917, and then later in Germany, Hungary, Austria and Italy. Historians have pointed to the similarity of the councils with a long line of direct democracy and self-determination movements “from the urban communes of the middle ages, the Swiss peasant cantons, the original collective settlements in North America, the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian soviets.”²²⁷ There is a resemblance between many of these grass-roots organisational forms that have emerged over the course of rebellions and revolutions. However, the councils of the early twentieth century were a very distinct institution that arose out of a revolutionary situation during the big strike movements of the preceding years as a means for the recently emerged working classes to represent their interests and overturn hierarchical structures that oppressed them. The structure of the councils was closely linked to the organisation of workers in large factories, which permitted their close co-operation and facilitated their resistance to domination. As one of the foremost historians of the council movement, Oskar Anweiler emphasises the uniqueness of this historical phenomenon.²²⁸ The councils also briefly reappear in Hungary and Poland in 1956, which Arendt rightly saw as following in the steps of the earlier councils.²²⁹

The main historical precedents for the post-First World War councils were the early workers’ soviets of the 1905 Russian Revolution.²³⁰ When the soviets first arose in May 1905 they were composed of deputies who represented primarily workers’ economic interests to factory

²²⁷ Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism*, 92.

²²⁸ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 4.

²²⁹ Oskar Anweiler, “Die Räte in der ungarischen Revolution,” *Osteuropa* (1958) 8, 393–400. For a more expansive list of workers’ councils in the twentieth century see Ness and Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master Ours to Own*. See also Assef Bayat, *Work, Politics and Power: An International Perspective on Workers’ Control and Self-management* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991). The most structured and lasting example of a council system, which is notably absent from Arendt’s analysis, is the revolutionary committees and collectives during the Spanish Civil War. What would have appeared to Arendt to be a purely social revolution was in fact a well-organised and effective transformation of the economic and political spheres through a democratic and participatory movement. See Olson, “The Revolutionary Spirit: Hannah Arendt and the Anarchists of the Spanish Civil War”; Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power During the Civil War* (University of North Carolina, 1979).

²³⁰ For the most detailed account of the role of the soviets in the 1905 Russian Revolution see Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 20–96.

owners in disputes over conditions.²³¹ The Mensheviks began campaigning for “revolutionary self-government,” which was followed by the formation of the St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers Deputies during the peak of the strikes in October.²³² These soviets politicised workers and gave them the opportunity to appoint recallable delegates to struggle for greater worker self-determination. Their political goal was a radically democratic parliamentary republic. The soviets conceived of themselves as revolutionary committees rather than the beginnings of a new state form.²³³ Though they only existed relatively briefly, these soviets left behind a revolutionary tradition amongst the workers, which emerged anew in 1917. Comparisons could also be made to the 1871 Paris Commune, although there is little evidence that there was any direct influence of the Commune over subsequent developments of the council form.²³⁴ The main connection is through Marx’s essay on the Paris Commune, which became the point of departure for Lenin’s analysis of the soviets.²³⁵

There are also theoretical forerunners to the councils in the writings of some 19th century anarchist and socialist authors. Arendt holds a particularly negative assessment of the ability of anarchists to grasp the council form. “They were singularly unequipped,” she claims, “to deal with a phenomenon which demonstrated so clearly how a revolution did not end with the abolition of state and government but on the contrary, aimed at the foundation of a new state and the establishment of a new form of government.”²³⁶ However, a number of the writings of the so-called “utopian socialists” demonstrate similarities with elements of the council idea, such as self-government, co-operative production and direct action. Arendt is mistaken in her claim that a clear separation can be drawn between the councils and anarchist thought. A number of contemporary anarchists draw from the period of the councils and from what is known as anarchist or left communism.²³⁷ Here, I will consider just two possible figures of the earlier writers, Proudhon and Bakunin. Proudhon theorised a form of society in which a number of small productive groups would be connected through a decentralised economic and

²³¹ Ibid., 40.

²³² Tormin, *Zwischen Rätediktatur und sozialer Demokratie*, 14.

²³³ Ibid. Cf. Trotsky: “The substance of the Soviet was its effort to become an *organ of public authority*.” Leon Trotsky, *History of the 1905 Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972) 176.

²³⁴ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 7. There are nevertheless many similarities between the two. For an overview see Donny Gluckstein, “Workers’ Councils in Europe: A Century of Experience,” in Ness and Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master Ours to Own*, 32–47, 34–36. See also Donny Gluckstein, *The Paris Commune: A Revolution in Democracy* (London: Bookmarks, 2006).

²³⁵ Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works, Vol. 22* (New York: International Publishers, 1975–1990) 328–341.

²³⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 261.

²³⁷ See for example Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

political federal system.²³⁸ His thought has been directly linked to the formation of the Russian councils and exercised a profound influence on the development of the Left in Europe.²³⁹ His confrontation with Marx, which led to the split in the First International, represents the first clash between centralising and federalist tendencies that would later play out in the struggle over the Russian soviets. There is also a resemblance of the council system in the work of Bakunin who proposed the formation of revolutionary committees that would elect members to councils. Bakunin argues for the “free federation from the bottom upward, the association of workers in industry and agriculture – first in the communities, then through federation of communities into districts, districts into nations, and nations into international brotherhood.”²⁴⁰ He goes further than Proudhon in attempting to connect theoretical principles of freedom and equality with revolutionary action. While followers of Proudhon and Bakunin were suggesting workers’ councils in the 1860s and 1870s as organs of class struggle, it was not until later that they received a concrete form.²⁴¹

Russia: Towards a Council Dictatorship

After a long nadir following the repression of the 1905 Revolution, the councils (in Russian: soviets) dramatically reappeared in Russia following a wave of mass strikes in March 1917.²⁴² Workers seized the opportunity to create workers’ organisations of various kinds, including trade unions, factory committees, soviets and political parties. Soviets flourished across Russia, arising to meet the immediate needs of the workers and soldiers. The most vibrant and democratic element of this workers’ movement were the factory committees and soviets that sprang up across the industrial centres of Russia.²⁴³ In spite of different tendencies amongst the workers, Trotsky notes that “the form of organisation [the soviets] itself stood clear of all debate.”²⁴⁴ In Petrograd, a central committee of this emerging workers’ movement was established in the form of the Petrograd Workers and Soldiers Soviet on 12 March 1917. This

²³⁸ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *The Principle of Federation* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1979).

²³⁹ Seeling, *Der Rätegedanke und seine Verwirklichung in Sowjetrussland*, 37.

²⁴⁰ Gregori Petrovich Maximoff (ed.), *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1953) 410.

²⁴¹ Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, 73.

²⁴² Dates refer to the Georgian calendar rather than the older Julian calendar that was used in Russia prior to 1918.

²⁴³ David Mandel, “The Factory Committee Movement in the Russian Revolution,” in Ness and Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own*, 104–129.

²⁴⁴ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution, Vol. I* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1932) 174.

soviet appealed to workers and soldiers to send deputies to elect an Executive Committee.²⁴⁵ Soviets elected one deputy for each 1000 workers to sit on the Petrograd Soviet, or alternatively, one delegate for each company of soldiers.²⁴⁶ A meeting of over 250 workers, soldiers and intellectuals elected Nikolay Chkheidze as chairman and Alexander Kerensky as vice-chairman.

At this time, the revolutionary forces that had opposed Tsarism were split between the bourgeois and liberal coalition on the one hand, who participated in the Duma and the Provisional Government, and the workers, soldiers and peasants on the other, who all established soviets.²⁴⁷ The Petrograd Soviet rejected participation in a Provisional Government with the Duma Committee, which consisted of Octobrists and Constitutional Democrats such as Foreign Minister Miliukov and Minister of War Aleksander Guchkov. Instead, the Petrograd Soviet presented the government with a list of demands as a condition of its support, which was signed on 15 March 1917.²⁴⁸ Their demands consisted of a complete democratisation of the state and the granting of civil and political freedoms. They called for an immediate general amnesty for all political prisoners and the abolition of restrictions and discriminations based on religious or national grounds. It was proposed that the hated police force of the Tsar would be turned into a national militia with elected officer subject to democratic controls. The workers also desired freedom and democracy in the workplace and rallied against autocratic managerial despotism in the factories.²⁴⁹ Chief among their priorities were an eight-hour workday, improved conditions and a right of supervision over how factories were organised. In March, workers' demands did not extend to managing the technical or economic side of production, but workers did want to limit the power of management and be able to negotiate organisational matters.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁵ "Provisional Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers' Deputies, Proclamations. March 12, 1917," in Frank Golder (ed.), *Documents of Russian History, 1914–1917* (New York: The Century Co., 1927) 285–286.

²⁴⁶ "Proclamation Calling for the Election of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies to the Petrograd Soviet," in Robert Browder and Alexander Kerensky (eds.) *The Russian Provisional Government: Documents Vol. 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961) 70–71.

²⁴⁷ Rosenberg, *The History of Bolshevism*, 122.

²⁴⁸ "Provisional Committee of the State Duma, Proclamations. March 3, 1917," in Golder (ed.), *Documents of Russian History, 1914–1917*, 308–313.

²⁴⁹ Mandel, "The Factory Committee Movement in the Russian Revolution," in Ness and Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own*, 107.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

In the first weeks of the Petrograd Soviet's existence the number of delegates grew to such an extent that by the end of March it had reached nearly 3,000.²⁵¹ Under such circumstances, it was difficult to organise efficient meetings. The sessions of the Soviet resembled mass demonstrations rather than functional meetings. The delegates decided to select a smaller council of about 600 members, which would be composed of an equal number of workers and soldiers. This reduced number allowed for more business to be conducted, but the majority of decision-making still occurred in the Executive Committee, which from the very first days of the revolution was the key organisational body of the soviets. By early April, the Executive Committee consisted of 42 members, so many that they created a special "Bureau of the Executive Committee" with only seven members to deal with current and urgent business.²⁵² This Bureau was allowed to take independent political decisions in emergencies.

The executive organs of the soviets began to meet daily, while the plenary sessions for ordinary delegates became more sporadic. The business of the executive required an ever-growing team of administrative labourers, most of whom had been clerks in old government departments. As the Executive Committee became a more efficient administrative machine, it began to lose touch with and organise independently from the rank and file soviet delegates. In theory, the delegates continued to hold the right to dismiss the Committee, guaranteeing that ultimate power remained in the lower soviets. Yet already in these early days a tension appeared between the soviets' role as revolutionary organisations and in their more permanent administrative functions. As institutions without a clear structure, constitution or proper delegation of roles, the soviets were not ideally suited for administrative tasks. However, in the absence of a permanent central government or well-resourced parliamentary institutions, they began to take on some of the day-to-day tasks of provisions, supplies and rebuilding.

For all practical purposes, February to October was a period of dual power in which the Provisional Government could only make decisions that were agreed to by the Petrograd Soviet. Workers and soldiers recognised the soviets as the true authoritative institutions in the country and would only follow orders of the government that were not in contradiction with

²⁵¹ "The Reduction of the Number of Deputies in the Soviet," in Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *The Russian Provisional Government: Documents Vol. 1*, 78.

²⁵² "The Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet," in Golder (ed.), *Documents of Russian History 1914–1917*, 288–290.

those from the Petrograd Soviet.²⁵³ However, during the first months of the revolution the soviets left the majority of business to the Provisional Government and established an agreement that the soviets would be a “controlling organ of revolutionary democracy.”²⁵⁴ The Petrograd Soviet did not request any formal definition of their authority as they saw their role as guiding the revolution and protecting it against counter-revolutionary forces. They aimed to influence the government and ensure its actions were in accordance with the principles of the soviets’ program. As a result, the government instituted wide-ranging political freedoms to citizens including civil rights, the abolition of restrictions based upon nationality, religion and class, penal reform, freedom of speech, press and assembly, the release of political prisoners, and the calling of a constituent assembly.²⁵⁵ The implementation of the soviets’ program was supervised by an “Observation Committee” that was selected by the soviets to monitor government activities.²⁵⁶ The committee was established to “convey to the Provisional Government the revolutionary demands, to pressure the government to fulfil these demands, and to control government actions.”²⁵⁷ Provincial soviets were instructed by Petrograd to “in no way solely assume government functions.”²⁵⁸ The soviets preferred to patrol elite actions in order to ensure greater levels of accountability to ordinary citizens than remove the government entirely.

This period of dual power raises what Trotsky called the “paradox of the February Revolution.” The working classes overthrew the old regime but appeared unable or unwilling to govern themselves. The Bolshevik critique of this period of dual power dismisses the workers’ conditional support for the Provisional Government alongside the soviet system as an example of their lack of political consciousness. However, it is difficult to dismiss the attitudes of the workers during this period as a product of their naivety. Workers were responding to genuine concerns of the possible deleterious consequences of a complete takeover of administrative responsibilities. They preferred to preserve their hard-fought

²⁵³ This was due to the first official decree of the Petrograd Workers and Soldiers Soviet, the Order No. 1, which stated that orders of the Provisional Government were only to be followed by the workers and soldiers if they did not contradict those of the soviet. See John Boyd, “The Origins of Order Number 1,” *Soviet Studies* (1967) 19 (3), 359–372.

²⁵⁴ “Resolution of Support for the Provisional Government by the All-Russian Conference of Soviets,” in Martin McCauley (ed.), *The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State 1917–1921: Documents* (London: Macmillan Press, 1975) 26–27.

²⁵⁵ “Attitude of the Executive Committee of the Soviet on the Question of Participation in the Provisional Government,” in Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *The Russian Provisional Government: Documents Vol. 1*, 125–126.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 126.

²⁵⁷ Quoted in Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 130.

²⁵⁸ “Instruction to All Soviets of Workers and Soldiers Deputies,” quoted in Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 130.

victories and extend these through pressure on the Provisional Government. Although the workers were distrustful of the propertied classes, there was little support for abolishing the Provisional Government and establishing a full council republic. As one meeting of metalworkers on 21 March 1917 near Petrograd resolved:

All measures of the Provisional Government that destroy the remnants of the autocracy and strengthen the freedom of the people must be fully supported on the part of democracy. All measures that lead to conciliation with the old regime and that are directed against the people must meet a most decisive protest and counteraction.²⁵⁹

Workers demanded a strict control of ministers within the government and the vigilant oversight of the implementation of the soviets' program. However, it was not seen as necessary to transform the councils into bureaucratic organisations that would fulfil governmental administrative duties.

Debates at the All-Russian Congress of Soviets in June presented a division between the moderate and radical socialists.²⁶⁰ The point of conflict related to the instability of a system of dual power. This could be resolved either through the dissolution of the Provisional Government and the assumption of sole power by the soviets or through the formation of a coalition government between socialists and moderates. The majority of delegates from the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries did not favour taking sole power and argued for joining the Provisional Government. They considered that complete soviet rule would alienate the peasantry and the bourgeoisie. The workers and soldiers organised in the councils represented only a small proportion of the total population. The moderate socialists argued that as the peasants and urban-dwellers were continuing to organise themselves in self-governing units, a national constituent assembly would be a more democratic indicator of the desires of the masses. At this point Russia was still largely an agrarian economy with a majority of peasants in the lower classes. The Bolsheviks, however, famously argued for Lenin's slogan of "all power to the soviets" and the rejection of the bourgeois Provisional Government. With the Bolsheviks still in a small minority at this stage, the All-Russian Congress decided against the assumption of power by the soviets and in favour of the

²⁵⁹ Quoted in David Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the fall of the Old Regime: From the February Revolution to the July Days, 1917* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983) 67.

²⁶⁰ Of the 1090 delegates at the conference, 285 were Socialist Revolutionaries, 248 were Mensheviks and 105 were Bolsheviks. See "Composition of the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies," Golder (ed.), *Documents of Russian History, 1914–1917*, 360–361.

formation of a coalition government. The Bolsheviks rejected participation in this government, thus setting the scene for the next phase of the conflict.

Following a failed revolt in July, the Bolsheviks began agitating both legally and in clandestine for an armed uprising of the workers that would bring them to power. Through his study abroad, Lenin had resolved that the revolution must destroy the existing state institutions and create new ones. Combining Marx's text on the Paris Commune with his experiences of the Russian Revolution, he saw the soviets as organs of revolutionary power that could be seized by the Bolsheviks to direct the revolution.²⁶¹ However, once the All-Russian Congress had refused to assume sole power, the Bolsheviks required a different course of action. "All hope for peaceful development of the Russian revolution has definitely vanished," Lenin declared. "The objective situation is either a victory of the military dictatorship ... or victory, in a decisive battle of the workers, which is possible only as a powerful mass rising against the government and the bourgeoisie."²⁶² During the course of 1917 the Bolsheviks attracted greater support from workers in the soviets due to their championing of the lower classes and their revolutionary agitation against the perceived failings of the Provisional Government.²⁶³ Steadily growing their party from disaffected moderate socialists, soldiers and peasants, the Bolshevik Party won 51% of the seats of the dumas in Moscow in September compared with only 12% three months earlier.²⁶⁴ The Bolsheviks also gained majority support in a few of the metalworkers' factories and made substantial increases in their vote in other areas from February to October 1917. The idea that the Bolsheviks seized power solely through illegitimate machinations underestimates their broad support amongst parts of the working class. However, even at the peak of their popularity in October no more than 5% of workers were actual members of the Bolshevik Party and only 1.5% of the Russian population were industrial workers.²⁶⁵ In October, the party stood at the precipice of an important decision for armed insurrection. Lenin strongly advocated for the seizure of power and attempted to persuade the Bolshevik Central Committee to support an uprising. The Committee was at first hesitant, but agreed on 5 November (Georgian calendar) to an armed rebellion. This was carried out on 7 November

²⁶¹ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 162.

²⁶² Lenin, "The Political Situation," in *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, 37.

²⁶³ Mark D. Steinberg (ed.), *Voices of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 4.

²⁶⁴ Oliver H. Radkey, *Russia Goes to the Polls: The Election of the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) 53.

²⁶⁵ Richard Pipes, *Three "Whys" of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1995) 32–33.

1917 when the newly formed Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet ordered the occupation of key government buildings and an attack on the Winter Palace.²⁶⁶

When the Bolsheviks took power they did so in the name of the soviets and the working class. However, it was not long after the initial overthrow that the Bolshevik Party began centralising power into its own hands. There was little support for armed action against the Provisional Government from the other socialist groups. Delegates to the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets from the Menshevik Party and Right Socialist Revolutionaries stormed out of the meeting on 13 November 1917 in protest over the Bolshevik's actions. When the new Council of People's Commissars was elected as the new government its members were drawn exclusively from the Bolshevik Party. The other socialist parties attempted to work towards a new socialist government with a coalition of members from different socialist groups, but the Bolsheviks rejected this possibility. Even key members of the Bolshevik Central Committee were critical of this rejection, with five members resigning due to not wishing "to bear responsibility for this fatal policy ... which is carried out against the will of a large part of the proletariat and soldiers."²⁶⁷ Although the Bolsheviks had majority support within a few of the workers' soviets, in reality, their armed takeover of power in November led to minority dictatorship.

As events progressed, it became apparent that the councils were part of a tactical manoeuvre for Lenin rather than a deep ideological commitment to worker self-organisation and autonomous activity. Lenin distrusted the unguided instincts of the masses, which he believed could serve as a bridge to reactionary political paths and economic and social chaos. In July 1917 Lenin wrote:

In times of revolution it is not enough to ascertain the "will of the majority." No – one must *be stronger* at the decisive moment, in the decisive place, and *win*. Beginning with the medieval "peasant war" in Germany ... until 1905, we see countless instances of how the better organized, more conscious, better-armed minority imposed its will on the majority and conquered it.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Alexander Rabinowitch, "The Bolsheviks Come to Power," in Martin A. Miller (ed.), *The Russian Revolution: The Essential Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) 104–146.

²⁶⁷ *The Bolsheviks and the October Revolution: Minutes of the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks) August 1917–February 1918* (London: Pluto Press, 1974).

²⁶⁸ Lenin, "Constitutional Illusions," in *Lenin Collected Works, Vol. 25*, 203.

As soon as the councils presented a hindrance to the revolutionary seizure of power by the party, their autonomy from the Bolshevik Party was drastically reduced. The majority of council delegates from other socialist parties did not agree with Bolshevik one-party rule nor did they accept the illiberal measures the Bolsheviks began to apply in order to secure their position. To combat dissent, in December 1917 the Bolsheviks created a new brand of secret police called the *Cheka* who had the power to arrest any citizen and to inspect any institution. This police force penetrated all soviets and began a wave of terror against suspected counter-revolutionaries and dissidents.²⁶⁹ The remaining socialist parties that were still working within the soviets now faced even more difficult conditions. The secret police also clamped down on anarchist activity and shut down several left-wing newspapers and publications. Within a matter of months, the Bolsheviks had disenfranchised the soviets and established control over the central apparatuses of government.²⁷⁰ On 14 June 1918, the Bolsheviks decided to expel all the Mensheviks and Right Socialist Revolutionaries from the soviets, further consolidating their one-party rule.

The re-emergence of local, decentralised councils in Kronstadt in 1921 elicited a hostile reaction from the Bolsheviks. The Kronstadt sailors demanded direct mass democracy in accordance with the will of the people rather than a Bolshevik minority. They proclaimed that “the Communist Party, which rules the country, has become separated from the masses, and shown itself unable to lead her from her state of general ruin.”²⁷¹ Both Lenin and Trotsky blamed the rebellion on the influence of foreign imperialist powers and dismissed it as a negligible challenge to Bolshevik rule. An examination of the demands of the Kronstadt sailors, however, reveals not the operation of foreign agents but a desire for “new elections to the Soviet ... on a fairer basis” that would lead to “true representation of the labourers” and for a rejuvenation of the Soviet as “an active and energetic organ.”²⁷² The criticisms were not directed at the soviet system as such but towards the Bolshevik control of this system through a dictatorial centralised party. Nevertheless, the rebellion stood as a challenge to Bolshevik rule and was ruthlessly put down. The final call of the Kronstadt delegates was “all power to soviets and not to parties,” before they were subdued by the Communist Party in March

²⁶⁹ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899–1919* (London: Fontana Press, 1990) 730.

²⁷⁰ Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) 161. For a more detailed account of the Bolshevik seizure of power from the councils see Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, 1917–1921* (London: Solidarity, 1970).

²⁷¹ “To the Populace of the Fortress and Town of Kronstadt, Comrades and Citizens!” *Kronstadt Izvestia* Number 1, 3 March 1921.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

1921.²⁷³ By 1921, with the crushing of the Kronstadt sailors' rebellion, all semblance of rule by the soviets themselves had vanished and the party had assumed complete control.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, created by the Bolsheviks as a one-party state, had little resemblance to the original council form or with the hopes and aspirations of most council delegates at the beginning of the revolution. As Alexander Rabinowitch notes, when the councils arose they were "genuinely democratic, embryonic organisations of popular self-rule" which channelled the goals of the dissatisfied lower classes of citizens for the "creation of an egalitarian society and a democratic-socialist, multi-party political system."²⁷⁴ The position of the councils within the increasingly totalitarian one-party state was reduced to bureaucratised pillars of state power.²⁷⁵ Yet the councils developed independently of Bolshevik ideology and only at a later date became incorporated within the communist state. Prior to this point, the councils were revolutionary organs of workers' power as part of a broad, popular democratic movement against tyranny. The Bolsheviks were able to pacify the democratic and anti-centralist forces in the councils and transform the self-government of elected factory committees and co-operatives into a centralised Bolshevik state.

Germany: The Councils Betrayed

The German councils, by contrast, are far less well known than their Russian counterparts. The later history of the collapse of the Weimer Republic and the rise of Nazism has tended to overshadow this ambiguous chapter in German history. Unlike many other revolts and revolutions of the twentieth century, the working class was the principal protagonist of the German Revolution.²⁷⁶ The revolution was organised by the strongest union movement in the world, which was made up of two and a half million workers. German workers had been steeped in Marxist theory for two generations and the unions were deeply involved in shop-floor negotiations over pay and working conditions. Renegades within the union movement

²⁷³ Israel Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 240.

²⁷⁴ Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007) x.

²⁷⁵ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 254.

²⁷⁶ Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 5.

constituted the main opposition to the First World War within Germany.²⁷⁷ They mobilised workers, disrupted ammunition production and attempted to bring Germany's war efforts to a halt. As the German armed forces showed the final signs of defeat by the Allies, events began to move at a lightning speed. Less than a week had passed between a sailors' mutiny at Kiel on 5 November 1918, the abdication of the Kaiser, and two separate declarations of a German republic on 9 November 1918.

The first of the declarations was by Philip Scheidemann of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), who declared Germany a republic from the Reichstag; the second was by revolutionary socialist, Karl Liebknecht of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD), who proclaimed Germany a free *socialist* republic from a balcony of the Berlin Royal Residence.²⁷⁸ This situation was symptomatic of the contested political climate at the time and the number of competing claims to power and authority. Liebknecht, who had recently been released from jail and refounded the Spartacus League, was viewed as an erratic radical by the SPD.²⁷⁹ In turn, the radical elements of the workers movement, including the USPD, the Spartacus League [*Spartakusbund*] and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards [*Revolutionäre Obleute*] – a radical organisation with extensive networks within the industrial factories – distrusted the SPD leadership who they saw as attempting to obstruct the revolution. The future governmental form of the new German state would not finally be decided until the National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils [*Allgemeiner kongreß der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte*] in mid-December 1918.

Later that same evening, on 9 November 1918, the Stewards attempted to seize the initiative by announcing elections for workers' and soldiers' councils to be held the following day.²⁸⁰ This group was the most organised and disciplined in the workers movement and made up the core of the organised sections of the councils. The Stewards had been planning a coup independently of the sailors' mutiny in Kiel and had been surprised by the abdication of the

²⁷⁷ This opposition was formed in spite of the support of the war by the unions' leadership. The main organisers of the anti-war efforts were the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. Martin Comack, *Wild Socialism: Workers Councils in Revolutionary Berlin, 1918–1921* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2012) 31–33.

²⁷⁸ Gabriel Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils! A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012) 27. Germany was officially called the Socialist Republic of Germany by the revolutionary councils during November and December 1918.

²⁷⁹ The Spartacus League was originally a group within the USPD who split with them to form the German Communist Party in December 1918.

²⁸⁰ Arnold, *Rätebewegung und Rätetheorien in der Novemberrevolution*, 70; Gluckstein, *The Western Soviets: Workers Councils versus Parliament, 1915–1920*, 98–100.

Kaiser and the pace of the revolution. The initial plans for the formation of workers councils were hastily drawn up by revolutionary steward, Richard Müller, “without checking it thoroughly, responding to the need of the hour.”²⁸¹ The brevity and ambiguity of Müller’s proposal would later allow different parties to attempt to impose their own designs on the council form. Upon hearing of plans for elections, the SPD sent speakers to the factories to influence the elections in favour of the SPD leadership.

In the confusion of elections the following day, council delegates in fact elected representatives to two political bodies: an interim cabinet for a provisional government and an Executive Council [*Vollzugsrat*]. Learning of the SPD’s attempt to control the provisional government, the Stewards suggested the establishment of an “Action Committee,” [*Aktionsausschuss*] which they hoped would assist in controlling the conservative leanings of the provisional government.²⁸² Delegates at the meeting rejected the suggestion, but a compromise was reached to elect an Executive Council, which was, in theory, the highest ranked political organ in Germany.²⁸³ The Executive Council, headed by Richard Müller, issued a declaration that the sovereignty and constituent power of the German people was represented by the councils and embodied (at least provisionally) in the Executive Council.²⁸⁴ But to the great dismay of the Stewards, delegates voted in favour of an SPD dominated interim cabinet to be established as a provisional government in Berlin. The cabinet of six members, called the “Council of People’s Deputies” [*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*], formally recognised the councils as the source of its power, although the exact relationship remained unclear.²⁸⁵ The Executive Council held the right to appoint and dismiss the six People’s Deputies and demanded a right of control over the operation of the ministries.²⁸⁶ But in practice, the Council of People’s Deputies began to assume greater power and governmental

²⁸¹ Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 76.

²⁸² Eberhard Kolb (ed.), *Quellen zur Geschichte der Rätebewegung in Deutschland 1918/1919, Band I: Der Zentralrat der deutschen sozialistischen Republik 19.12.1918 – 8.4.1919, Vom Ersten Zum Zweiten Rätekongress* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968) xv.

²⁸³ Rosa Luxemburg, “Um den Vollzugsrat,” in *Die Rote Fahne*, 26, 11 December 1918.

²⁸⁴ Richard Müller, speech to congress on 16 December 1918, Zentralrat der sozialistischen Republik Deutschlands, *Allgemeiner Kongreß der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte Deutschlands vom 16. bis 21. Dezember 1918 im Abgeordnetenhaus zu Berlin. Stenographische Berichte* [Congress Report] (Berlin, 1919) 16–17.

²⁸⁵ In negotiations between the Council of People’s Deputies and the Executive Council on 22 November 1918 over a division of powers and duties it was agreed that “the political power lies in the hands of the workers’ and soldiers’ councils in the German Socialist Republic. It is their duty to maintain and to expand the achievements of the revolution and to suppress the counterrevolution.” Although at this meeting it was agreed that the Council of People’s Deputies would act as the executive body and the Executive Council would have a “right of control,” the basic powers and responsibilities of each organ were never formally set out. See “Vereinbarung zwischen dem Rat der Volksbeauftragten und dem Vollzugsrat vom 22.11.1918,” in Gerhard A. Ritter and Susanne Miller (eds.), *Die Deutsche Revolution 1918–1919: Dokumente* (Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe Verlages, 1981) 119.

²⁸⁶ Richard Müller, *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik, Vol. 2* (Vienna: Malik, 1925) 146.

functions and disregarded resolutions of the Executive Council, leading to an increasingly acrimonious relationship between the two.²⁸⁷ During November and December 1918 open hostility was temporarily muted due to a strong public demand for unity across the working class.

The composition of the Council of People's Deputies itself was indicative of the competing ambitions and tendencies that existed within the revolutionary movement. There was a political schism between the three SPD members and the three USPD members of the Council over the precise role of the workers' and soldiers' councils.²⁸⁸ The more radical USPD favoured the establishment of the councils as permanent political and economic institutions, at least until more of the revolution's aims had been achieved.²⁸⁹ In their conception, the councils should form the basis of a new executive power to be based in Berlin composed of directly recallable delegates. In the economic sphere, the USPD advocated for worker-managed factories under democratic control. At the very least, there was a strong desire among the radical elements of the revolution to create more facts on the ground before anything resembling nation-wide elections could be considered. They wanted to destroy the power base of the old industrialists and officer class and transform the structures of German society so that more conservative political parties would no longer appear as viable options in a future election. On the other side stood the SPD members led by their party leader, Friedrich Ebert. He considered the councils as merely temporary organs with only limited economic functions and preferred the immediate election of a constituent assembly to establish a parliamentary republic.²⁹⁰ The SPD thought that fundamental issues of constitutional law, the composition of the economic order and the new structure of government should be decided after the election of a national assembly. In reality, they were sceptical of the chaotic and undisciplined nature of the councils and did not consider them as desirable alternatives to a parliamentary system. This disagreement led to one of the biggest questions of the National

²⁸⁷ Richard Müller, "Report by the Executive Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Great Berlin," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 37.

²⁸⁸ Richard Müller, "Democracy or Dictatorship," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 59.

²⁸⁹ Tormin, *Zwischen Rätediktatur und sozialer Demokratie*, 59. In the early stages of the revolution the USPD believed that the councils might exist alongside a parliamentary democracy but from December 1918 onwards they became increasingly disillusioned with these prospects and preferred the replacement of parliamentary institutions with a council system. Ralph Haswell Lutz, *The German Revolution, 1918–1919* (Stanford: Stanford University Publications, 1922) 268.

²⁹⁰ Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 74.

Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils: the choice between parliamentary democracy and proletariat democracy, or otherwise stated, "national elections or the council system."²⁹¹

The popular nature of the council movement represented a dramatic break with the previous theory and practice of the social democrats in Germany. The general view in the SPD was that the councils were filled with poor unskilled labourers who knew nothing about socialism or revolution.²⁹² The SPD held a wait-and-see approach when it came to the revolution, which focussed on improving German workers' living conditions and led to political passivity.²⁹³ The SPD had tried throughout the war period to control workers, make reasonable demands to government and focus efforts on production. Rather than conceive socialism as a matter of top down planning within state apparatuses, the councils embodied a more radical form of socialism consisting of mass participation from below.²⁹⁴ Delegates were voted from within the factories and were directly accountable to their constituencies. The entire movement was based on the participation of ordinary workers and their continual pressure on leadership to fulfil key demands. The leadership of the SPD considered this form of organisation irresponsible and subject to the whims of the masses who lacked the hard-headed realism of their leaders. There was also a general fear of the bolshevisation of German politics and the threat of minority takeover. However, the German councils were not explicitly modelled after the Bolshevik council state. Indeed, the extreme measures that the Bolsheviks undertook throughout 1918 during the beginning of the "Red Terror" tended to discredit the idea of a proletariat dictatorship.²⁹⁵ Many of the German socialists were neither favourably disposed towards the Bolsheviks nor particularly impressed by the results that they had achieved.

The split within the provisional government represented the precarious balance of power between revolutionary and conservative forces. In reality, a state of dual power persisted in Germany throughout November and December of 1918 between the councils and the old state bureaucracy, military command and police force. As the latter offered no resistance to the councils, the whole structure tended to remain in place.²⁹⁶ The conservative elements of the state were compelled to begrudgingly accept the de facto position of the councils. The

²⁹¹ This was the central point on the agenda of the National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils.

²⁹² Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution* (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1976) 268–271.

²⁹³ For a study of the SPD's politics of "attentismus" see Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1973).

²⁹⁴ Comack, *Wild Socialism*, 1.

²⁹⁵ Lindemann, *The 'Red Years: European Socialism Versus Bolshevism, 1919–1921*, 35–36; Ernst Däumig, "The National Assembly Means the Councils' Death," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 42.

²⁹⁶ Tormin, *Zwischen Rätediktatur und sozialer Demokratie*, 89–90.

bourgeoisie, industrialists and organised unions were suspicious of the councils, but were too timid to risk a direct confrontation.²⁹⁷ The revolutionaries had perhaps naively underestimated the staying power of the bureaucratic apparatuses even after the revolution had taken place. Friedrich Ebert managed to insist that the majority of personnel in these institutions should retain their positions and that council delegates should monitor them to ensure compliance with revolutionary objectives. Later, Richard Müller would complain how “the entire political and economic life is the same, only that the workers’ and soldiers’ councils, embodied in the Executive Council, represent the sovereignty of the state.”²⁹⁸ There was no thought within the SPD of the purging or democratising of the bureaucratic apparatus. They used their role within the council movement to protect the state machinery and allow it to retain much of its old character.

Even in the earlier stages of the revolution, conservative forces in the councils were already attempting to undermine them from within. Unknown to most council members at the time, late in the evening on 10 November 1918 a secret deal was struck between SPD leader, Friedrich Ebert, and head of the armed forces, General Wilhelm Groener. According to this pact, the General guaranteed the military’s support of the SPD against the councils so long as Ebert agreed to reinstate military discipline and restore the power of the officers.²⁹⁹ Fearing the radicalisation of the revolution along the lines of the Russian soviets, Ebert allied himself with the conservatives and old elites of the Empire in order to avoid a social revolution.³⁰⁰ For this reason, real power in the council movement always remained with the SPD, since they were the only faction with whom the old conservative powers would negotiate.³⁰¹ Ebert aimed to win over the old elite to the SPD and form a ruling coalition against the radical elements of the councils.³⁰² There is extensive evidence that he joined the revolution primarily to slow events down and control it. His participation in the Council of People’s Delegates was a strategic play rather than any show of support for the council form or the ambitions of a social revolution.

²⁹⁷ Ernst Däumig, “The Council Idea and Its Realization,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 53.

²⁹⁸ Müller, speech to congress on 16 December 1918, *Conference Report*, 15–16.

²⁹⁹ Sebastian Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* (Berlin: Kindler, 2002) 120–121. The primary source for this information is General Groener’s memoirs. As there is no evidence to confirm the conversation from Friedrich Ebert’s side the credibility of these memoirs has been doubted by critics. See “General Groener über sein Bündnis mit Ebert vom 10.11.1918,” in Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die Deutsche Revolution 1918–1919: Dokumente*, 98–99.

³⁰⁰ Müller, “Democracy or Dictatorship,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 60.

³⁰¹ Müller, “Report by the Executive Council of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils of Great Berlin,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 35.

³⁰² Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution – 1918/19*, 121.

The slogan of the workers' movement was "*Freiheit, Friede und Brot!*" [freedom, peace and bread]. Their program consisted of calls for democracy, pacifism, socialisation of the economy and an end to the hierarchical and bureaucratic apparatuses that oppressed them.³⁰³ An indication of the desires and aspirations of the rank-and-file delegates of the councils can be gained from the speeches and voting that took place at the first National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils from 16 to 20 December 1918 to decide on the future of the German republic.³⁰⁴ Plans for the congress were first spoken about on 10 November 1918 at the initial gathering of council delegates at Circus Busch.³⁰⁵ The proceedings of the conference offer invaluable source material on the political perspectives of the delegates and the competing arguments that were staged within the councils. The 489 delegates of this so-called "Parliament of the Revolution" were to decide on the future of the German state form and other central political issues such as the timeframe of national elections, socialisation of industry and the structure of the military.³⁰⁶

The most immediate demands of the soldiers were for a dismantling of the system of military hierarchy and discipline, including the abolition of all marks of rank, the election of officers by their men, and the takeover of military discipline and command by the councils. The Congress approved these measures through its affirmation of the radical "Hamburg Points" that were introduced by the Hamburg soldiers' council and approved without dissent.³⁰⁷ Friedrich Ebert did not openly oppose the points at this stage, although he would have known that they would have been entirely unacceptable to the military high command who supported him. Instead, he sought to influence the progression of events through his position as the Representative for Military Affairs on the Council of People's Delegates. In late December 1918, Ebert commissioned the formation of new voluntary units, which would later be used against the revolutionary forces. One of the contradictions of this period was that although delegates voted for the transformation of military hierarchy and discipline, in practice many

³⁰³ Alexander Bessmertny and M. Neven DuMont (eds.), *Die Parteien und das Räte-system* (Charlottenburg: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte m. b. H., 1919) 65.

³⁰⁴ The conference ran until 20 December 1918 rather than 21 December 1918 as is falsely stated even in the official conference report. For a comprehensive analysis of the conference see Roß, *Biographisches Handbuch der Reichsrätekongresse 1918/1919*.

³⁰⁵ Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 41.

³⁰⁶ Roß, *Biographisches Handbuch der Reichsrätekongresse 1918/1919*, 166. The phrase "*Revolutionsparlament*" comes from the SPD periodical, *Vorwärts* no. 345, morning edition on 16 December 1918.

³⁰⁷ *Congress Report*, 346.

of the troops still elected their old officers back to the same position. As a result, there was minimal structural change.³⁰⁸ After the elections on 19 January 1919 the government declared the Hamburg points to be mere “guidelines” and refused to change the fundamental structure of the army. By June 1919, soldiers’ councils were no longer functioning in Germany and had been replaced by the establishment of a new army.³⁰⁹

On the morning of Friday, 20 December 1918, delegates of the congress debated measures for socialising the economy. Such a program had already been announced by the provisional government in a declaration on 10 November 1918, “for the speedy and thorough socialisation of the capitalist means of production.”³¹⁰ However, aside from appointing a “Socialisation Committee” to produce a report, the cautious interim government had been content with minor social reform measures rather than a change of relations between capital and labour.³¹¹ From the revolutionary outbreak onwards, the word “socialisation” was at the forefront of national debate. In a 1919 pamphlet entitled “What is Socialisation?” leading German Marxist theorist and member of the Socialisation Committee, Karl Korsch, describes socialisation as a “new regulation of production with the goal of replacing private capitalist economy with a socialist communal economy.”³¹² This constituted a striving towards the democratic control of the means of production by workers who would determine production based on the needs of the community. For Korsch, socialisation did not simply mean that workers would begin to run factories, as in the case of producers’ associations, but that production would be brought under the ownership and control of the community as a whole. In Korsch’s conception, this would entail a middle ground between the exploitation of capitalist production and the centralised planning of state socialism through a network of producer and consumer groups in civil society. Other individuals and groups within Germany’s council movement had varied understandings of what was meant by socialisation,

³⁰⁸ Ernst Daumig, “The National Assembly Means the Councils’ Death,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 47.

³⁰⁹ Ben Fowkes (ed.), *The German Left and the Weimar Republic: A Selection of Documents* (Haymarket Books: Chicago, 2015) 224.

³¹⁰ “Aufruf der Versammlung der Berliner Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte vom 10.11.1918” in Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die Deutsche Revolution 1918–1919: Dokumente*, 96–97.

³¹¹ The Socialisation Commission submitted its Preliminary Report on 15 February 1919, advising for the “expropriation of State and private capital in mining.” The Report was not seriously acted upon and by April 1919 the Commission disbanded citing opposition and obstruction from the Economics Ministry.

³¹² Korsch, “What is Socialization?”. For further discussion of socialisation see also Rudolf Hilferding, speech to Congress, 20 December 1918, *Congress Report*, 312–322.

but most of these entailed a form of social ownership of the means of production and worker management and control of key industries.³¹³

Rudolf Hilferding opened proceedings on the final day of the conference by presenting a report from the Socialisation Committee. Acknowledging the considerable difficulties that would be involved, he recommended socialisation of the mines and parts of the coal industry, while approaching the socialisation of other industries with more caution. He requested that agricultural production by peasant farms should be left for the time being, while industries in which capitalist cartels and trusts had produced particularly exploitative systems should be gradually socialised. The main practical difficulty facing the government was the shortage of capital and raw materials. The SPD leadership considered that the socialisation of industry would further hamper an already crippled German economy. In a previous cabinet meeting, Gustav Bauer, SPD Minister for Labour, contended that socialisation was likely to produce “Russian conditions” of rationing and starvation.³¹⁴ Philipp Scheidemann maintained that socialisation measures would scare away employers and hinder the creation of new jobs. The USPD delegates questioned whether full economic recovery was really a condition for socialisation, but even left-wing delegates recognised the obstacles of socialising the economy in one country alone without international solidarity.³¹⁵ Yet, there was general optimism towards the idea of a gradual process of socialisation, particularly from the miners who pushed for even more immediate steps to be taken. In response to the question of pursuing socialist measures in one country alone, it was argued that if Germany started the process other countries would follow and German socialisation would help spread socialism abroad. Hilferding concluded the debate as follows: “Germany is going this alone. But, party comrades, precisely that makes this task not only difficult but also promises that the solution will carry an extremely highly reward.”³¹⁶ Delegates voted with a clear majority in favour of the socialisation of all industries that were “ripe” for it, in particular, the mining industry.³¹⁷ The victory for the SPD was to formulate this resolution such that there arose no immediate actionable directives, allowing for the delay of any practical socialisation measures.

³¹³ See Emil Frankel, “The Status of ‘Socialization’ in Germany,” *Journal of Political Economy* (1924) 32 (1), 68–85.

³¹⁴ Kolb (ed.), *Quellen zur Geschichte der Rätebewegung in Deutschland 1918/1919, Band I: Der Zentralrat der deutschen sozialistischen Republik 19.12.1918 – 8.4.1919, Vom Ersten Zum Zweiten Rätekongress*, xxiii.

³¹⁵ Eduard Heimann, “Die Sozialisierung,” *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (1919) 45 (3), 527–590, 540.

³¹⁶ Rudolf Hilferding, closing address to congress, 20 December 1918, *Congress Report*, 341–344.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 344.

On the issue of council democracy or national assembly, on the other hand, the majority of delegates were clearly not in favour of asserting the councils as a new state form. They were generally against the idea of establishing anything like the council dictatorship of Russia.³¹⁸ One of the most important consequences of the Congress was the scheduling of national elections for 19 January 1919, even earlier than first proposed, which placed Germany on track to become a parliamentary democratic republic. Ernst Däumig's recommendation of the continuation of the council system was voted down with a sizable majority. The safer option, presented by SPD member, Max Cohen, was to call for national elections to a new parliament. His reasoning was that without a clear majority the socialists would face substantial resistance from the bourgeoisie and risked a Bolshevik-style minority takeover and civil war. The negative experience of Russia played a large role in the minds of the delegates as the German revolutionaries had always considered that a German revolution would necessarily be based on a proletarian majority. For many of the delegates who had either fought in the war or experienced other wartime hardships, the idea of experimenting with a largely hitherto untested state form was an unattractive option. There was a widespread hope that the socialist goals of the revolution would be implemented from above by a socialist majority government following a national assembly. As a result, the congress voted in favour of Cohen's suggestion. Däumig warned that the councils would be signing their own death sentence by supporting a national vote, since the bourgeoisie would never allow the councils and parliament to exist side by side. He argued for a "proletarian democracy expressed in the council system" that would be a more genuine expression of the will of the people than a bourgeois parliament.³¹⁹ Richard Müller also questioned the other delegates:

Should the fate of the German Revolution be handed to a national assembly elected by every German adult—exploiter and exploited, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary alike—or should the proletariat, the armed workers and soldiers, keep and secure the political power in a council system, establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, and wrest the economic power from the bourgeoisie?³²⁰

In this instance, Däumig's warnings proved accurate. Following a workers' revolt in early January 1919 the SPD and the army acted to violently repress the councils with the assistance of the reactionary *Freikorps*, returned soldiers still loyal to the officer class. The hastily assembled "Revolutionary Committee" who had issued a call for the overthrow of the SPD

³¹⁸ Ulrich Kluge, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918–1919* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) 59–60.

³¹⁹ Däumig, "The National Assembly Means the Councils' Death," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 43.

³²⁰ Müller, "Democracy or Dictatorship," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 59.

government was little match for the well-organised and disciplined troops loyal to the government. The uprising was put down and a number of its leaders were killed in the process. The move to the right by the SPD was assisted by the sizeable vote they received in the national elections, winning 163 of the 421 seats, which solidified their position and emboldened their stance against the revolutionaries. With Luxemburg and Liebknecht executed by the *Freikorps* and the councils undermined and powerless, a new parliament was elected and plans for more extensive social and political transformations were put on hold.

While it is clear from the councils' proclamations that their most immediate concerns were for the democratisation of social and economic life, delegates could not see at the time that their support for a national assembly would lead to the defeat of these more important goals. The revolution ultimately failed to attain the workers' more pressing demand for the reorganisation of the economy and military along the lines of a socialist democracy. During the first months of the revolution, the SPD leadership were able to outmanoeuvre their adversaries and impose their own narrative on the course of the revolution. In this way, they managed to prevent the realisation of the more far-reaching demands of the radical elements of the councils. Events transpired slightly differently in other German cities, where a number of "council republics" were declared in Munich, Bremen and Brunswick.³²¹ However, by 1921, the organisational form of the councils was largely defeated across Germany.³²² It was left to intellectuals to debate over different theoretical models after it had been vanquished as a true historical force.³²³

Between Council Dictatorship and Social Democracy

In this section, I contrast Arendt's account of the councils with the historical evidence in order to scrutinise a number of her claims. My first point of contention relates to Arendt's assertion that the councils were not content to be temporary revolutionary organs, but in fact considered

³²¹ See Allan Mitchell, *Revolution in Bayern 1918/1919. Die Eisner-Regierung und die Räterepublik* (München: Beck, 1967); Richard Grunberger, *Red Rising in Bavaria* (London: Arthur Barker, 1973).

³²² On the transition from a revolutionary council movement to the constitutionally recognised "Works Councils" [*Betriebsräte*] of the Weimer Republic see Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 127–145. See also Boris Stern, *Works Council Movement in Germany* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925).

³²³ Gabriel Kuhn argues "only after the revolution was the council system explored in more theoretical depth by authors like Otto Rühle, Karl Plättner, and Erich Mühsam." Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, xiii. The term "council communism" as distinguished from official communism came to be used in 1921.

themselves to be a new form of government. She portrays the history of the councils as a competition between two systems: the party and the council system, which “came to the fore in all twentieth century revolutions.”³²⁴ In Arendt’s conception, the councils were popular assemblies that strived for a transformation of the state and “made all attempts at establishing themselves as permanent organs of government.”³²⁵ She criticises Marx and Lenin for failing to grasp this aspect of the councils and for viewing them as merely temporary institutions of a revolutionary movement. Is Arendt accurate in considering the councils as a new form of government? This question implies a determination of whether it is even possible to refer to a council *system*, as opposed to merely a council movement or a revolutionary program. In fact, as the councils never had one unique form, it would be misleading to speak of *a* council system in the singular.³²⁶ There was much disagreement over their proper role as the councils had little in the way of theoretical development before they arose. Some commentators have attempted to differentiate between different forms of councils, identifying their various features and creating a council typography.³²⁷ A limitation with such a schematic approach is that rarely did the actors themselves agree on which form of council they were participating in. The structure and function of the councils was itself the subject of political struggle and debate. One’s understanding of the nature of the councils was often determinative of a broader political program relating to how society and its main institutions should be structured. A great lack of clarity persisted over the essential tasks of the councils, even among their staunchest defenders.³²⁸ Debates were had over the structure of the councils, the source of their power, their sphere of activity (political or economic) and their relationship to existing social and political institutions.³²⁹ Configurations of regimes that incorporated some form of a council structure ranged from models of social democracy to council dictatorship.

A distinction can be drawn between the ideological conceptions of the councils within different groups and the actual actions of the councils in practice. On the one hand, we have already seen that some of the more radical council delegates clearly imagined the councils as the basis of a new state form. In Germany, members of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Spartacus League offered detailed outlines of the possible structure and functions of a new

³²⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 265.

³²⁵ Ibid., 256.

³²⁶ Gutmann, *Das Rätesystem: Seine Verfechter und seine Probleme*, 130.

³²⁷ See Tormin, *Zwischen Rätediktatur und sozialer Demokratie*.

³²⁸ Korsch, “Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany”.

³²⁹ For an overview of the different conceptions of the council system from the perspective of the communists, socialists, democrats, conservatives and independents see the collection of primary sources in Bessmertny and Neven Du Mont (eds.), *Die Parteien und das Rätesystem*.

council state. Along these lines, the Executive Council in Berlin declared in a statement of 17 November 1918: “The German state has to become a proletarian republic on the grounds of a socialist economy.”³³⁰ The future of the German Revolution was seen by its revolutionary elements as a choice between bourgeois democracy and a council republic.³³¹ On the other hand, the SPD believed the councils should not exceed anything more beyond a minor economic role in channelling workers’ demands. This is the fate that eventually awaited the councils in Germany in Article 165 of the new Reich Constitution, which restricted the workers’ councils to purely economic tasks.

In practice, however, an analysis of the actual decisions of the council delegates reveals a consistent disinclination towards abolishing other formal institutions of government. In the case of Germany, most of the urban and rural councils outside of Berlin did not exercise anything more than a mere control function over existing state apparatuses.³³² Some attempts were made to construct council republics, most notably in Bavaria and in Hungary, but these endeavours were largely unsuccessful and differed from the aspirations of the majority of those who participated in the councils in other parts of Europe.³³³ For this reason, it is misleading for Arendt to assert that the councils always considered themselves as permanent organs of government that would survive the end of the revolution.³³⁴ However, it is equally disingenuous of some of her critics to claim that the councils never entertained such aspirations.³³⁵ The reality is far more complex. Councils arose in different institutional and political contexts and were subject to competing and antagonistic social forces. Many of the participants in the councils were extremely sceptical of the promises of bourgeois representative democracy and insisted upon extensive political and economic transformation. Yet, during the periods of their greatest power and influence, the councils hesitated at asserting their command in the absence of formal parliamentary majorities. Despite the desires of the revolutionaries, ordinary council members balked at the idea of creating permanent governing institutions out of these revolutionary organs. The problem with

³³⁰ Quoted in Müller, “Report by the Executive Council of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils of Great Berlin,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 33.

³³¹ Müller, “Democracy or Dictatorship,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 59.

³³² Korsch, “Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany”.

³³³ Grunberger, *Red Rising in Bavaria*; Andrew C. Janos and William Slottman (eds.), *Revolution in Perspective: Essays on the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971).

³³⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 256.

³³⁵ Medearis, “Lost or Obscured? How V. I. Lenin, Joseph Schumpeter and Hannah Arendt Misunderstood the Council Movement,” 452; Isaac, “Oases in the Desert,” 160.

Arendt's assertion of the councils as a new form of government is that the complexities of these debates are glided over in favour of her mythologised narrative.

Doubt can also be cast on Arendt's claims that the councils were neither concerned with socio-economic affairs nor considered predominantly as working class institutions. With regard to the former claim, we have already seen in the previous chapter that Arendt's characterisation of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 as concerned almost exclusively with political matters was inaccurate. Her attempt to draw a distinction between the councils' economic and political activities is no more successful in the cases of Russia and Germany in 1917–1919. There is much evidence to suggest that the councils were engaged in a wide variety of social and economic activities.³³⁶ In the immediate aftermath of the war, when economic production had ground to a halt and government bureaucracies were incapacitated, the councils undertook a number of urgent practical activities such as economic planning, resource distribution and social welfare. Similarly, there is little evidence for Arendt's assertion that the councils sought to avoid economic activities in favour of some conception of a purely political function, however this might be understood. No major group who participated in the councils shared Arendt's position of the necessity of maintaining a distinction between the economic realm and a public sphere of freedom. One of the oddities of her interpretation is that in order to claim that the councils were the emergence of a new state form she would have to side with the more radical council delegates who conceived of them as forming the structure of a proletarian republic *and* a socialist economy. The radical political demand for a new state form went hand in hand with calls for the reorganisation of the economy. The division that Arendt attempts to establish between economics and politics simply did not exist within the council movement. Not only were the majority of councils formed in factories by workers for the express purpose of organising labour, but such a division between economic and political affairs is contrary to the dominant political ideology of the council delegates. Rather than establish a strict distinction between politics and the economy, councils sought to introduce democratic controls into the workplace. It was their desire to have a greater control over this aspect of their daily lives that incited workers to demand council organisations play a greater role in key industries.

³³⁶ Ernest Mandel, "The Debate on Workers' Control," *International Socialist Review* (May–June 1969) 30 (3).

The question of whether the councils were exclusively working class institutions – along the lines of Marx’s concept of the proletariat – is more difficult to answer. Certainly, a number of the leaders and organisers of the councils were imbued with the spirit of revolutionary Marxism, as were radical elements of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and other organised workers. However, the inclusion of soldiers in both council systems often led to a dampening of the more radical aspirations of the revolutionary leaders. Soldiers, on the whole, were less favourably disposed to radical transformations and more influenced by liberal ideology that favoured national elections to a parliament. The way in which their units were structured also led them to exercise a greater than proportional influence over the voting sessions, since a soldier often represented far fewer than the 1000 workers supposedly represented by each factory delegate.³³⁷ Even within the ranks of the Marxists there was no consistent view that the councils were revolutionary working class institutions capable of carrying out a full social revolution. The orthodox Marxist view held by the organised unions was that the true revolution could only proceed once a majority of the population backed the idea of a socialist society. According to this interpretation, it was the unions and the SPD that were the true working class institutions, rather than the unruly councils who could make unrealistic demands and jeopardise the slow and gradual achievements of the working class. It was only the position of the more radical delegates that the councils constituted the sole instrument of proletariat power and social revolution.³³⁸ The moderates argued that the urban poor and other rural people had not yet organised themselves and that they too required their voices to be heard. Yet in spite of the moderates’ fears of mass radicalism through the councils, there was little doubt from any of the parties that at the very least these institutions represented the interests of ordinary workers and soldiers. They were viewed by political actors at the time as composed of elements of the working classes and representing interests that were in conflict with those of the bourgeoisie and the old government bureaucracy.

Next, we turn to Arendt’s suggestion that the councils were opposed to the parties and represented a different principle of organisation. For Arendt, “what the councils challenged was the party system as such,” a conflict which came to the fore “whenever the councils, born of revolution, turned against the party or parties” as a danger to their existence.³³⁹ Yet for Arendt to say that there was a strict opposition between the “parties” on the one hand and the

³³⁷ Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 76.

³³⁸ Däumig, “The National Assembly Means the Councils’ Death,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 43.

³³⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 258.

“councils” on the other, ignores the extent to which organised political parties were able to exert their influence over the emergence of new political actors and institutions. It is not possible to demarcate between two separate “systems,” since most actors within the councils were also party members and the dynamics of party politics played out within the councils. The councils emerged as a political movement through the organisational initiative of the main political parties rather than in opposition to them. Council delegates were generally not elected from amongst the factories and trades of the proletariat, but were organised through the existing socialist parties, which tended to increase factional fighting and manipulation.³⁴⁰ In her exhaustive study of the German National Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils, Sabine Roß concludes that party-membership was the strongest determinant of voting patterns at the Congress.³⁴¹ Both of the two main political parties pre-caucused the day before the Congress and differences in voting represented a deep ideological divide between the parties over their interpretation of the meaning and the consequences of the revolution. One could be critical of the negative influence that party manipulation had over the course of the history of the councils, but it does not make sense to imagine that they emerged on the basis of an anti-party political agenda or with a view to replace a party system of government, which had not even existed in Russia or Germany prior to the revolution. Arendt’s criticism of the party system is more intelligible when considered as her reaction to the machinations and power politics of the American two-party system of her time.

The main weakness Arendt admits of the councils is that they “did not distinguish clearly between participation in public affairs and administration or management of things in the public interest.”³⁴² In her account, this is the only hint that the councils suffered from an internal shortcoming, rather than merely adverse external circumstances. Her romanticised glossing of the councils renders them a disservice by failing to properly illuminate their weaknesses. It leads to an unrealistic assessment of a set of institutions that even sympathetic participants admitted were improvised, at times disorganised, and evolved haphazardly according to the demands of the situation.³⁴³ For example, historical evidence indicates that the councils rarely adhered to strict voting methods, meeting procedures or verification of deputies.³⁴⁴ In Germany, initial plans for the formation of workers councils were drawn up

³⁴⁰ Korsch, “Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany”.

³⁴¹ Roß, *Biographisches Handbuch der Reichsrätekonferenzen 1918/1919*, 166.

³⁴² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 265–266.

³⁴³ Däumig, “The Council Idea and Its Realization,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 52.

³⁴⁴ Karl Kautsky “Nationalversammlung und Räteversammlung,” in *Freiheit*, 6 December 1918.

without any consideration for the huge industrial and working class neighbourhoods outside of Berlin's city limits.³⁴⁵ Committed radicals would later complain that the council delegates themselves often did not have the faintest idea of the organisational tasks of the councils or what historical role they could have played. Karl Korsch lamented:

Such was the lack of clarity which, during the first period immediately following the November events, prevailed with respect to the essential tasks of the Council dictatorship, even among the most renowned defenders of the revolutionary idea of the Councils in Germany.³⁴⁶

Furthermore, the councils faced the inevitable difficulty of gradual bureaucratisation as they became increasingly burdened with administrative affairs. In Russia, as the councils took on more tasks, they were forced to create an executive, which became more autonomous and disconnected from its constituents.³⁴⁷ Nevertheless, a crucial feature in all of the pre-1920 councils was that deputies had recallable positions. This ensured, at a minimum, the control of the deputies' work by their constituents. However, the councils' large bodies and occasionally disorganised meetings demonstrated that they were less suited to complex administrative tasks than to their function as organs of a revolutionary movement. Their strength lay in their ability to represent the interests of some of the lowest strata of society in a simple, reproducible and accountable political structure that was responsive to workers' needs and could be readily assembled. As the councils began to resemble administrative apparatuses of the state, they were less able to act as revolutionary organs.

A further weakness on which Arendt remains characteristically silent is the question of gender politics and the lack of women in leadership roles in the councils. Although all parties in the councils broadly supported women's emancipation, this did not equate to equal representation of men and women within the councils' executive.³⁴⁸ There were hardly any female officials compared to the significant numbers of women within the rank and file of the workers and their decisive role in revolutionary events.³⁴⁹ Of the 489 delegates at the German Congress, only two were women: Klara Noack and Kätha Leu.³⁵⁰ Leu was the only woman to speak and

³⁴⁵ Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 76.

³⁴⁶ Korsch, "Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany".

³⁴⁷ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 112.

³⁴⁸ Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 10. For example, the 1919 National Assembly was the first time women were able to vote in national elections in Germany.

³⁴⁹ "The Unions and Women," *Der kommunistische Gewerkschafter* (1921) 2; Helga Grebing, *Frauen in der deutschen Revolution 1918/1919* (Heidelberg: Stiftung Reichspräsident Friedrich Ebert Gedenkstätte, 1984).

³⁵⁰ Roß, *Biographisches Handbuch der Reichsrätekonferenzen 1918/1919*, 209–212.

this was at the end of the final day of the conference. She was also the first to address the delegates with the gender inclusive “Parteigenossen und Parteigenossin.”³⁵¹ Before she spoke, the chairperson insisted that an important task of the revolution was to actively support women’s interests, but this plea could barely be heard above the noise from the previous discussion.³⁵² Sabine Roß notes that this lack of female representation cannot be put down to a lack of active and politically capable women, since there were a large number of talented women involved in the council movement.³⁵³ While the councils provided an institution for ordinary workers to exert a greater political influence than in any other time in history, they systematically reproduced the same patriarchal structures that excluded women from public life.

A return to the historical evidence of the council movements in Russia and Germany has revealed a different narrative to the one put forward in Arendt’s interpretation of the council system. This historical analysis provides a critical lens through which Arendt’s account can be interrogated to better understand the structure and contradictions of her political thought. One important conclusion is that Arendt’s retrieval of the councils cannot be taken as a historically accurate portrayal of the actions of council delegates during this period. Acknowledging this discrepancy facilitates a more productive encounter with Arendt’s political theory and the historical practices of the council delegates. The misrepresentations in Arendt’s account often highlight moments of tension in her work and theoretical difficulties with which she continued to grapple. However, the historical errors and distortions of Arendt’s interpretation should not lead us to consider her political theory fatally flawed. Rather, they assist us in distinguishing between the incisive aspects of her analysis, the points at which Arendt’s evaluation should be treated with caution and elements of the councils that would benefit from further research.

Against the backdrop of this historical portrait of the council movements, I will now outline the development of my argument in the following chapters. In the next chapter, I return to Arendt’s political theory to explore how her writings on council democracy provide an alternative set of political principles that can serve as a counterweight to the currently dominant liberal conception of democratic government. Next, in chapter four, I continue my

³⁵¹ *Congress Report*, 352.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ Roß, *Biographisches Handbuch der Reichsrätekongresse 1918/1919*, 212.

analysis of Arendt's political theory by turning to her institutional proposal of a council democracy and examining its strengths and weaknesses for democratic theory. In the final chapter of the thesis, I consider the ways in which the historical councils can be reconsidered in order to provide new resources for contemporary democratic practices. Here, I put aside Arendt's political theory and return to the historical examination of the councils undertaken in chapter two. The theoretical work of chapter five builds directly upon my historical analysis of obtaining a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the political struggles of the councils. In this sense, I continue to draw from both Arendt's political theory and the historical practices of council delegates in order to question current democratic institutions.

Chapter 3: Arendtian Principles

Arendt celebrates the abyssal nature of human action – its ability to make radical ruptures with the past and to initiate new political beginnings. But despite the numerous interpretations and analyses of Arendt’s account of political action, a crucial dimension has remained vague and undefined: how could it be said that action both “springs from” and is “guided by” something Arendt calls a principle? Furthermore, Arendt claims that although this principle lies at the origin of political action as its inspiration and source, it “becomes fully manifested only in the performing act itself.”³⁵⁴ To add to the complexity, Arendt appears to vacillate on the location of these principles, arguing first that a political action “carries its own principle within itself,” yet at another point claiming that principles “inspire ... from without.”³⁵⁵ A re-examination of this material reveals that one of Arendt’s most novel and important innovations is her conception of immanent principles that inspire, guide and organise political action.³⁵⁶

Arendt develops her own understanding of political principles from Montesquieu’s distinction between different forms of government and their animating principles. While a form of government for Montesquieu describes its nature and constitutive structure, it is a principle that animates it and inspires the actions of both the government and its citizens, actions whose positive effects cannot be explained through the merely negative boundaries of the law. Her remarks on principles, scattered through a number of her books and essays, are elliptical, all too brief, and are at times even mysterious. Of those who have attempted to understand this aspect of her work the temptation has been to either declare it incoherent or interpret it

³⁵⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 152.

³⁵⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 205; Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 152.

³⁵⁶ For previous discussions of Arendt’s principles see Knauer, “Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Political Action,” 724–726; Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, 12–13; Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 171–175; Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 33–39; David Ingram, “*Novus Ordo Seclorum*: The Trial of (Post) Modernity or the Tale of Two Revolutions,” in Larry May and Jerome Kohn (eds.), *Hannah Arendt Twenty Years Later* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997) 232–245; Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 241–253; Sofia Näsström, “The Right to Have Rights: Democratic Not Political,” *Political Theory* (2014) 42 (5), 543–568; Lucy Cane, “Hannah Arendt on the Principles of Political Action,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (2015) 14 (1), 55–75; Lucy Cane, “Arendt on Principles, the Right to Have Rights, and Democracy: Response to Näsström,” *Political Theory* (2015) 43 (2), 242–248; James Muldoon, “Arendtian Principles,” *Political Studies* (2016) forthcoming.

through the lens of other theorists that are foreign to Arendt's thought.³⁵⁷ As a result, particular interpretive difficulties are ignored or glided over. This oversight is unfortunate because Arendt implies that a proper understanding of principles is essential to her theory of political freedom and human action.³⁵⁸ Indeed, political principles appear at numerous decisive points in Arendt's work and could be described as one of her central political concepts.³⁵⁹ There is evidence that this lacuna in the interpretation of her work is beginning to be addressed.³⁶⁰ However, recent attempts at explicating Arendt's concept have failed to perceive the multi-faceted nature of political principles or reveal the political logic that underpins them. I aim to clarify Arendt's conception of principles and demonstrate that they contain a transformative potential insofar as they are able to open up new relationships with the past and enable future political transformations.

There are two important ways in which my analysis of Arendt's political principles contributes to a project of interrogating the weaknesses and limitations of liberal representative democracy. First, a reconstruction of the principles of Arendt's council democracy offers a more substantive and robust conception of the principles of democratic government than that of minimalist liberal accounts. Arendt holds that a system of competitive elections in which citizens endowed with political rights vote for political leaders at periodic elections demonstrates only a minimal commitment to rigorous democratic criteria.³⁶¹ She accepts that some form of competitive elections must take place in a democracy, but wishes to add to this a concern for a fuller realisation of democracy's basic values such as political freedom and citizen empowerment. Central to Arendt's perspective is the active participation of citizens in governmental decision-making processes. Second, I draw on Arendt's conception of principles in order to highlight the methodological resources

³⁵⁷ Kalyvas and Ingram turn to Habermas in an attempt to "complete" or "revise" Arendt's analyses. For a critique of a Habermasian reading of Arendt see Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," 274–308.

³⁵⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 152. See also her discussion of principles in "Introduction into Politics": "the question as to the principles of action no longer informs out thinking about politics, at least not since the question as to which polities and forms of government represent the best of human communal life has fallen silent." Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007) 197.

³⁵⁹ The main analyses of principles in Arendt's work: Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ix, 460–479; Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 331–338; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190–191, 237–238; Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 151–154; Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 63–69, 192–200; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 79, 114–117, 162–165, 177, 204–206, 212–213, 237–238, 258–264; Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 52, 76, 189–191, Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind, Vol. 2* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 199–216.

³⁶⁰ See Cane, "Hannah Arendt on the Principles of Political Action"; Näsström, "The Right to Have Rights: Democratic not Political".

³⁶¹ For a minimalist account of democracy see Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 267.

available in her work for engaging with historical exemplars. I explicate how Arendt's use of political principles opens up an innovative relationship to the past in which partially realised ideals and historical exemplars can be appropriated for political transformation in the present.

The first half of the chapter seeks to explain the nature and function of political principles in Arendt's work. I contend that Arendtian principles contain three partially overlapping dimensions, which are provided with different weighting depending on the context in which they arise in her work. In "What is Freedom?" Arendt emphasises the *originary* power of principles, their ability to inspire and generate free political action that is unconstrained by a prior system of moral standards. In this context, principles ensure the spontaneous and non-determined nature of action by distinguishing it from the means-ends character of a pre-determined motive and dictating will. In *On Revolution*, however, Arendt highlights the *guiding* power of principles, an internal ground of judgment and normative element that arises through the performance of the act.³⁶² This standard guards against the arbitrariness and potential boundlessness of action and prevents a self-defeating pursuit of an absolute beginning upon which to base it. In the essays collected in *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt illustrates the *organising* power of principles, their embodiment in the institutions and practices of a political community based on a shared fundamental experience and set of political convictions.³⁶³ Finally, I argue that principles contain a transformative potential insofar as a return to forgotten principles can inspire new political action on the basis of their rearticulation and renewal.

The second half of the chapter continues the analysis begun in chapter one of providing a more participatory and empowered interpretation of Arendt's political theory. I reconstruct the three central principles of Arendt's council system: political freedom as participation in political institutions, the empowerment of political communities and decentralised federalism. She argues that her basic set of political principles "establishes a diametrically different set of guiding principles from the 'moral' standards inherent in the Platonic notion of rule."³⁶⁴ The principles of the councils are opposed to the older principles of sovereignty, rulership and the nation-state, which she views as having animated modern politics from the French Revolution. By putting forth an alternative set of principles Arendt makes an intervention into

³⁶² See also Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190–191.

³⁶³ See also Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 331–335.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

her own political world and contributes to public deliberation over the appropriate form of democratic government. Her purpose is not to legislate universally applicable principles to politics but to engage with contemporary debates and persuade her readers of the value in these forgotten perspectives. Arendt proposes that the councils represented alternative power structures that could challenge the centralised power of parliamentary and state institutions. In this sense, Arendt's political principles gesture towards different forms of political organisation through which democracy's central values could be actualised.

Three Perspectives on Arendt's Principles

The original source of Arendt's conception of political principles is Montesquieu, who defines a principle as "that by which a government is made to act" and "the human passions that set it in motion."³⁶⁵ Drawing from Montesquieu, the first important aspect of Arendtian principles is their capacity to "inspire" or "inspirit" action. She describes principles as the "source" and the "wellspring" of action, since principles "inspire the actions of both rulers and ruled."³⁶⁶ Action does not necessarily take part in a determined and rule-bound causal series since it has the capacity to start something new and connect with a new principle. Human beings are capable of new beginnings because action can be inspired by new principles and begin unpredicted chains of events. In this sense, principles sustain human beings' capacity for radical novelty by providing a spontaneous and undetermined point of departure for action. A difficulty that arises in the interpretation of this position is that Arendt makes it clear that she does not wish to equate principles with the subjective psychological motives that cause individual human agents to act. How could a principle be both that which inspires action and yet still somehow be distinguished from psychological motives? It appears absurd that a principle could be simultaneously "never the direct cause of action" but "nevertheless what first sets it into motion."³⁶⁷ Arendt's argument relies on a distinction that she establishes in "What is Freedom?" between an action's principles and its motives and goals.³⁶⁸ Her analysis of this correlation is essential to a proper understanding of her

³⁶⁵ Charles de Secondat Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002) Book III.

³⁶⁶ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 196, 65.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁶⁸ Arendt offers a slightly different formulation in "Introduction into Politics," differentiating between an action's ends, goals, motives and principles.

conception of principles. The relationship between the three is explained by Arendt as follows:

Principles do not operate from within the self as motives do ... but inspire, as it were, from without; and they are much too general to prescribe particular goals, although every particular aim can be judged in the light of its principle once the act has been started ... In distinction from its goal, the principle of an action can be repeated time and again, it is inexhaustible, and in distinction from its motive, the validity of a principle is universal, it is not bound to any particular person or to any particular group.³⁶⁹

When Arendt states that principles can “inspire” action she is not referring to an agent’s empirical desires and motivations. An agent’s motives are a private affair and in certain respects are of limited significance to the public realm. Arendt states that an act “makes manifest its principle, [but] does not reveal the innermost motivation of the agent.”³⁷⁰ Principles, for Arendt, are not purely subjective motives, but rather, public grounds of justification for the act. To say that an agent is “inspired” to act is not to make a claim about the actual subjective motives of the agent but to refer to the norms and reasons according to which such action could be justified. There is an overriding public dimension to these grounds because they cannot rest on merely contingent or arbitrary motives. Arendt believes that an actor should be able to give an account of their actions and to say how they came to hold their position and why they acted in the way they did.³⁷¹ In this respect, Arendt distances herself from Montesquieu’s subjective and psychological language of “*les passions humaines*.”

In opposition to the private existence of motives, principles have an inter-subjective dimension that allows them to be deliberated on in the public realm. Arendt argues that “in psychological terms,” political principles could be described as the “fundamental convictions that a group of people share.”³⁷² The reference to psychology is confusing here because Arendt is elsewhere clear that principles should not be understood in terms of an individual’s psychological motivations.³⁷³ However, the appeal to “fundamental convictions” can be viewed as referring to the shared political values of a community, rather than the particular motives of an individual. A community’s political values will “inspire” in Arendt’s sense of the term insofar as they represent the deep-seated and habitual political orientation in the

³⁶⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 152

³⁷⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 87–88.

³⁷¹ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 41–44.

³⁷² Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 195.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 65.

world from which agents are accustomed to acting. This is based on Arendt's belief that it is not the negative boundaries of the law but the positive values of a community that will be the source of political action.

Furthermore, Arendt distinguishes her conception of principles from particular political goals. In *Between Past and Future*, she argues that the general and non-specific nature of principles is what separates them from the particular and determinate ends of political action. Although an action can manifest a principle in a significant and meaningful way, principles should not be confused with the concrete and particular goals of the action itself. It appears that Arendt seeks to differentiate between the broad and general nature of political values from their embodiment and actualisation in particular political acts. A goal is fixed, definable, and attainable, whereas a principle exists at a higher level of generality and could never be fully realised in any particular political action. However, it is difficult to reconcile this position with her analysis of goals and principles in *The Promise of Politics* in which she offers a different account of their relationship. In this text, goals come to take on a number of the characteristics that in other works Arendt attributes to principles. Arendt describes goals as the "guidelines and directions by which we orient ourselves" and the "standards by which everything that is done must be judged."³⁷⁴ When these texts are considered together it is difficult to avoid the impression of ambiguity in Arendt's distinction between goals and principles. There is no clear way to make sense of the discrepancy aside from noting that it only concerns her account of goals and in both of these texts the multi-faceted nature of principles appears the same. The account of principles remains more consistent than that of goals across her corpus. Even in *The Promise of Politics* Arendt argues that when a principle is reduced to a mere goal, it loses its character as a constant, habitual and inspiring principle of action and becomes merely a standard of judgment.³⁷⁵

The second element of an Arendtian principle is its capacity to act as a non-prescriptive ground of judgment from which political actions can be assessed and evaluated. She argues that principles are "the guiding criteria by which all actions in the public realm are judged beyond the merely negative yardstick of lawfulness."³⁷⁶ These principles are immanent, which is to say that they are contained within the action itself and are opposed to the

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 194–195.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 195.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 65.

imposition of transcendent sources of authority, power and control. It is best to begin with Arendt's own account of this:

What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world.³⁷⁷

Political action, which Arendt connects to the idea of a new beginning, contains within it a normative principle as part of its constitutive structure. She views action as being informed by these principles, which arise at the same moment as the performance of the action itself. Political action thus consists in a concomitant co-creation of an objective deed and a principle according to which this deed can be understood and evaluated. The two appear together simultaneously in the public realm in which they can be interpreted and judged. The principle plays a double role as that which can retrospectively be said to have inspired the act and subsequently a standard by which future acts can be compared. For Arendt, such principles are not transcendent norms that form part of an objective and universal metaphysical system. In order to preserve the freedom and spontaneity of action Arendt does not appeal to an external norm against which an action should be judged. The role of the principle, once it has arisen alongside and as a result of the action, is to "save" it from its potential to deviate from its intended path or to descend into arbitrariness. The principle can be appealed to as a guideline and parameter for how the action should continue to be carried out and unfold. The fact that the principle arises as part of the action itself means that it is a self-limitation of the action rather than its subsumption under an external norm. As a result of their immanence, Arendt's principles are not eternal laws but historically specific criteria that are attached to and rely upon the actions that brought them into existence. Their immanence to an action places them in a temporal logic of finitude and a specific relationship to the unstable worldly affairs of human beings. The dependence of principles on the continuation of the action that formed them gives them a particularly fragile and tenuous existence: "the manifestation of principles comes about only through action, they are manifest in the world as long as the action lasts, but no longer."³⁷⁸ As components of action, principles arise within particular historical moments and in relation to sets of established social practices and norms. For

³⁷⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 205.

³⁷⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 152.

example, in Montesquieu, the principles of honour and virtue provide the evaluative criteria according to which public action within monarchies and republics can be judged. The principle of honour does not act as a law or rule in the prescriptive sense that it would be against the law to act dishonourably, but reference back to this principle provides criteria against which action can be measured.

A third perspective on Arendt's principles is their organisational function as the central values of a political community.³⁷⁹ Within this context, principles represent the predominant ideals that prevail in the public realm and form of government. These fundamental principles act as a reference point and framework around which other ideas and concepts are organised. Such principles are pervasive throughout the public realm and are valid for "both the actions of the government and the actions of the governed."³⁸⁰ There are a number of crucial places where Arendt describes principles in these terms, such as her reference to the council system as based upon "a completely different principle of organization" than that of sovereignty.³⁸¹ She also names "public freedom," "public happiness," "mutual promise and common deliberation," "the federal principle" and "the republican principle" as central organising forces during the American Revolution.³⁸² Principles become embodied in both the objective institutions of a political community and in the subjective inclinations, dispositions and habits of its citizens. As a principle of organisation, a particular political value becomes persuasive as "criteria according to which all public life is led" and as a standard that becomes embedded within institutional forms.³⁸³ Arendt emphasises this objective dimension of principles by arguing that when principles are no longer heeded "the political institutions themselves are jeopardized."³⁸⁴ They also apply to individuals' conduct in public life. Principles can have a structuring effect insofar as they "map out certain directions" for acceptable patterns of public conduct.³⁸⁵ Arendt is not referring to people's behaviour in their private lives or the construct of some abstract and hypothetical "ideal type." Political principles animate public life, the

³⁷⁹ Contra Näsström I argue Arendt was attentive to the ways in which political principles engendered specific forms of government. See Näsström, "The Right to Have Rights: Democratic not Political," 3.

³⁸⁰ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 331.

³⁸¹ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 189. For other references to the organising power of principles see Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 213, 262; Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 65, 120; Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 331–338; Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 76.

³⁸² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 162, 206, 213.

³⁸³ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 331.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 332.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 335.

shared realm in which citizens confront one another as equals and deliberate over common concerns.

Montesquieu understood a form of government to consist of a composition of its structure and animating principle. Arendt's revival of this form of analysis demonstrates that she saw some validity in providing a typology of different forms of government and searching for their unity and structure – an analysis she had already undertaken with totalitarianism.³⁸⁶ In an application for funding from the Rockefeller Foundation Arendt states that she would raise again “the old question of forms of government, their principles and their modes of action.”³⁸⁷ In spite of reservations about the nature of Montesquieu's “unsystematic and sometimes even casual observations,” the great benefit of his mode of inquiry is that through remaining attentive to the central animating principle of a government he provides a “deep insight into the unity of historical civilizations.”³⁸⁸ The reference to a spirit or a unity of a people might raise suspicions that Arendt is engaged in a metaphysical analysis of an essence of a government or people. However, Arendt argues that it is precisely in Montesquieu's “less metaphysical” analysis in comparison to the later uses of “spirit” by Herder and Hegel that proves “fruitful for the study of politics.”³⁸⁹ In contrast to these metaphysical questions, Arendt is engaged in a phenomenological analysis that privileges the experiential character of human existence. She argues that an organising principle can be derived from a “fundamental experience” of a particular form of politics.³⁹⁰ For example, a principle could be based on “the experience of equality,” which would find “an adequate political expression in republican laws, while love for it, called virtue, inspires actions within republics.”³⁹¹ Arendt's return to Montesquieu and the seemingly anachronistic study of principles is due to its capacity to reveal the fundamental values of a political community and their corresponding conception of politics. However, Arendt does not agree with Montesquieu that the possible number of principles of different forms of government could be reduced to the three he identifies of virtue, honour and fear. She discusses a range of different principles throughout her work and it appears that almost any political value could count as a principle if it was that which

³⁸⁶ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 461. Elsewhere Arendt states that “there is hardly an event of any importance in our recent history that would not fit into the scheme of Montesquieu's apprehensions.” Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 329.

³⁸⁷ Letter to the Rockefeller Foundation, quoted in Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, xvii.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

inspired an action or organised a political realm.³⁹² Arendt envisages that a society will have a number of competing principles at any given time that are debated in the public realm. The question of which principle, or constellation of principles, is currently dominant is a matter for agonistic contestation, deliberation and political judgment.

The tripartite distinction of the three perspectives on Arendt's principles does not presume that the remaining two aspects are absent from her discussion of political principles in each text. Rather, her analysis places emphasis on particular characteristics of the concept depending on the context and perspective. The way in which different aspects of the concept appear and recede when viewed from distinct angles reflects the perspectival nature of political deliberation and judgment.

The Transformative Potential of Principles

Political principles play a distinctive role in Arendt's theory due to the historical relation they establish between past events, the present and most importantly, as I will stress, an open and yet undetermined future. Arendt argues that principles "come down to us through history" and can be "repeated time and again" in different historical contexts leading to their regeneration in new political settings.³⁹³ For Arendt, principles are general in the sense that they are "not bound to any particular person or to any particular group."³⁹⁴ By returning to hitherto forgotten principles, political actors evoke different ideals and values to those currently dominant in their political realm and attempt to inspire action based on their rearticulation and renewal. Arendt's writings are filled with stories of people who produced radical political transformations through a return to principles. A prominent example is the American revolutionaries who were able to "change the whole structure of the future world" through a rejuvenation of several interrelated political principles.³⁹⁵ Political transformation in this broad sense involves extraordinary political moments of new foundations or altering the fundamental identity of political regimes. A principle remains dormant while not being

³⁹² For example, "such principles are honor or glory, love or equality, ... or distinction or excellence." Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 152. Arendt also states that Montesquieu's enumeration of principles is "of course pitifully inadequate to the rich diversity of human beings living together on the earth." Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 2, 202.

³⁹³ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 195; Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 151.

³⁹⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 151.

³⁹⁵ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 2, 215.

practiced in the public realm, but can become a site of transformation if kept alive in historical memory. It is this future-oriented character of principles in Arendt's work that has received insufficient attention in the secondary literature.³⁹⁶ There is also a connection between Arendt's discussion of historical examples and principles insofar as both attempt to hold open the potential for future political transformation by establishing a relation between the present and past exemplary actions and institutions. In this section, I unpack the significance of political principles for Arendt's political theory.

First, the rearticulation of past principles serves a negative or critical function in creating a site of contestation over current values. The invocation of a new principle creates a rupture in the present, which Arendt refers to as a "hiatus in the continual flow of temporal sequences."³⁹⁷ This challenges established principles and calls into question the central values of a political community. It destabilises the authority of current institutions and practices by denaturalising their universal and commonly accepted status. Second, and relatedly, a return to principles harbours a transformative potential because it opens up a broader perspective of political ideas and initiates new debates on the best form of communal life. In "Introduction into Politics," Arendt laments the "narrow horizon of experience left open to us" in the way in which we answer the most important questions of our age due to our neglect of political principles.³⁹⁸ She underscores the world-expanding nature of principles in their capacity to return to forgotten meanings of politics that no longer animate the public realm. Resuscitating lost principles of the past allows for a radically altered perspective on the present through a new standpoint and set of political values. Without new principles broadening the scope of political debate, Arendt argues it would be possible to "take for granted that there is not, and never has been, an alternative to the present system."³⁹⁹

Third, Arendt differentiates her own use of principles from the nostalgic remembrance of a former golden age that could be retrieved as a political model for the present. In her view, this relies on a misleading notion of history as the cyclical movement of ages in which a certain past era could be turned to as a model for a future society.⁴⁰⁰ Arendt, perhaps unfairly, takes aim at Marx for basing his vision of a post-capitalist classless society on the idea of an

³⁹⁶ The notable exception to this is Lucy Cane's excellent analysis of the repetition and regeneration of principles. Cane, "Hannah Arendt on the Principles of Political Action".

³⁹⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 2, 205.

³⁹⁸ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 197.

³⁹⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 263.

⁴⁰⁰ See her discussion of Marx and Nietzsche in Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 2, 215.

“original communism” to which it might be possible to return. In her interpretation of political principles, Arendt proposes a vastly different relationship between past and future. Principles operate within Arendt’s particular understanding of history, interpreted as the continual interruption of actions and events rather than a natural or cyclical process. Since the continuity of tradition has been broken by the phenomenon of totalitarianism, the only way to gain access to the past is through a selective and fragmentary historiography, captured by Walter Benjamin’s phrase, “a tiger’s leap into the past.”⁴⁰¹ Arendt’s view of history engages with the past, but is also attentive to the promise of the future through the creative and transformative repetition of principles. Political action draws upon principles of the past, but their manifestation in a new political context implies a necessary transformation and reconfiguration.

For example, Arendt argues that the principle of freedom has never appeared since the Greek *polis* with the same clarity. In the *polis*, freedom was the fundamental dimension of human life. The experience of freedom in Athens serves as an exemplar and ideal for future generations.⁴⁰² However, a return to this principle would not reconnect us with an unbroken tradition by reviving the exact institutions and practices of the Athenians. For Arendt, it is not necessarily the “organizational forms” that should be replicated, as if from a blueprint, but “certain ideas and concepts” that are partially realised within a political realm.⁴⁰³ These ideas, or exemplars, can be looked back on for inspiration of different ways of practicing politics rather than exact models to be copied. The rearticulation of a principle relies upon a double movement, in which the new political action is both rooted in the past and shapes the future through an act of radical creation. Historical imitation necessarily involves a degree of innovation, which transforms the nature of the principle through its rearticulation. As a result, the renewal of a principle such as political freedom will always be a form of reinvention and transformation.

Political principles embody a tension in Arendt’s work between her criticism of the dangers of absolute new beginnings and the need for political action to be nevertheless free and unconstrained by prior historical sequences. Although conditioned by its historical context and relationship with past struggles, the rearticulation of principles facilitates a new political

⁴⁰¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) 261.

⁴⁰² Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 195.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 120.

action that is more than a simple repetition of the past. Unique adaptations of principles can produce novel political actions within a new context and setting. Departing from the largely positive assessment of the American revolutionaries in *On Revolution*, in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt is critical of their tendency of “understanding the *new* in terms of an improved re-statement of the old.”⁴⁰⁴ Upon returning to ancient prudence to supplement their own experiences of self-government, the Americans decided that the only possibility for them to undertake a new political endeavour was to repeat the primeval founding of Rome anew. Arendt suggests that attending to the importance of principles might open an alternative pathway that does not rely on the recreation of mythical foundations or the view that new action will simply be a return to the past. To avoid this impasse, Arendt suggests a “tentative alternative,” the only one that she believes would escape the search for a lost golden age.⁴⁰⁵ For Arendt, it is Augustine who stands alone as the thinker who could have underpinned what she describes as a “truly Roman or Virgilian philosophy of politics.”⁴⁰⁶ From Augustine’s philosophy, Arendt draws the lesson that human beings are capable of new beginnings based on the fact of natality – the entrance of new human beings into the time continuum of the world. Thus, for Arendt, the possibility of a return to principles and new political action is underwritten by the fact that new human beings are continually being born into the world. Although Arendt only briefly touches upon this point, it reveals the essential connection between principles and the capacity for free political action to begin unpredicted chains of events.⁴⁰⁷ The rejuvenation of principles facilitates political action as an unexpected beginning which is able to “break with the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary.”⁴⁰⁸ It enables political transformation through a reconfiguration of past actions and the adaption of principles to contemporary political circumstances.

The Three Principles of Arendt’s Council Democracy

In this section, I sketch the three main principles of Arendt’s council democracy: (1) political freedom understood as participation in political institutions, (2) the empowerment of

⁴⁰⁴ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 2, 216.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ For a more thorough engagement with Arendt’s conception of natality see Miguel Vatter, *The Republic of the Living: Biopolitics and the Critique of Civil Society* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); see also Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 28, 37–38.

⁴⁰⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 205.

autonomous communities, (3) federalism interpreted as the decentralisation of authority structures and the devolution of power and decision-making responsibilities to mid- and low-tier political bodies. These principles present an outline of its key values and reveal what is distinctive about it in comparison to other forms of democratic government. They are not exhaustive in the sense of encompassing all of the conceivable values that the council system seeks to advance. Such a list would also include the principles of deliberation, distinction, plurality and nonsovereignty, among others.⁴⁰⁹ Nor do the three main principles offer a comprehensive justification and defence of the council system as an independent model of democracy.⁴¹⁰ It is not the intention of this thesis to provide a full comparison and defence of Arendt's council system against liberal democracy. Rather, the principles of the councils present an outline of a more substantive democratic ideal based on active citizen participation in government decision-making.

I. Political Freedom

Arendt's conception of freedom is notoriously difficult to disentangle and articulate.⁴¹¹ Located at the interstices of questions of spontaneous beginnings, free movement, a dramaturgical account of action and worldly disclosure, discussions of freedom are woven throughout her work. Unfortunately, Arendt provides no single, coherent and well-defined account of freedom that remains constant throughout her life.⁴¹² A brief overview of her main works reveals the shifts in her views on freedom. One of the earliest and most enduring elements of freedom to emerge in Arendt's writing is freedom understood as an innate capacity to begin and interrupt a natural process.⁴¹³ She describes freedom in these terms in

⁴⁰⁹ For a number of alternative principles of the council system see Sitton, "Arendt's Argument for a Council Democracy"; Totschnig, "Arendt's Argument for the Council System: A Defense".

⁴¹⁰ A more complete justification and defence of council democracy would have to include a comparison of why its principles should be adopted rather than other possible alternatives. See Michael Saward, *The Terms of Democracy* (London: Polity Press, 1998).

⁴¹¹ For different perspectives on Arendt's conception of freedom see Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 211–216; Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 200–210; Michael Wilkinson, "Between Freedom and Law: Hannah Arendt on the Promise of Modern Revolution and the Burden of 'the Tradition,'" in Goldoni and McCorkindale (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Law*, 35–62; Ronald Beiner, "Action, Natality and Citizenship: Hannah Arendt's Concept of Freedom," in Zbigniew Pelczynski and John Gray (eds.), *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984) 349–375.

⁴¹² For a number of Arendt's varied definitions see Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 478–479, Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177–178, 234–236; Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 146, 153; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 22, 115, 210, 235.

⁴¹³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 479.

The Origins of Totalitarianism as a capacity for origination – the ability to create something out of nothing rather than merely to decide between established alternatives.⁴¹⁴ The importance of new beginnings remains an integral aspect of her concept of freedom despite being later incorporated into a broader framework.⁴¹⁵ In her next major published work, *The Human Condition*, her analysis of freedom occurs within an expressivist model of the virtuosity of human action.⁴¹⁶ Here, freedom is not provided with an extensive independent treatment, but is instead connected to notions of human plurality and action. Freedom is employed primarily in a negative function to criticise the conceit of a belief in a self-mastering sovereign subject.⁴¹⁷ Arendt argues that freedom under the condition of plurality is not identical with sovereign control and mastery because to begin something new entails being unable to foretell the full consequences of one's actions or how others will respond as a result. Insofar as it takes on a positive sense, freedom and action are interrelated in a vision of the agonistic striving of individuals for excellence and public glory through acts of self-disclosure among their peers.⁴¹⁸ Within this Homeric-influenced moment, freedom appears in an individualistic and dramaturgical light as an individual's faculty of self-disclosure in their struggle for immortality.⁴¹⁹ In Arendt's later work, such as *On Revolution*, these aspects recede in favour of a more explicitly collective and political conception of freedom focused on the involvement of actors in joint political processes of oratory, deliberation and decision-making.

The complexities and vacillations in Arendt's account have led interpreters to identify constitutive paradoxes in her concepts of freedom and politics.⁴²⁰ Attention has been drawn to tensions between an expressive and communicative account of action,⁴²¹ a heroic and participatory vision of politics,⁴²² and a temporal and political dimension of freedom.⁴²³

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 478–479. In *Origins* this definition is also supplemented by a spatial metaphor of the necessity of established law to create a space for freedom to emerge. Laws are prerequisites to freedom insofar as they create the boundaries within which human beings can move freely. For further analysis of freedom of movement as another important aspect see Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 9.

⁴¹⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 166.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 153. For interpretations of Arendt as containing a model of freedom as the virtuosity of performance see Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 54–55; Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 4.

⁴¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234–236.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 56, 205–206.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 194–195. See also Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 200.

⁴²⁰ Canovan argues that “one way of describing her distinctive approach to the idea of freedom might indeed be to say that she was trying to graft the existentialist sense of the open future that always lies before each individual on to classical republican images of citizens standing shoulder to shoulder in defence of their common freedom.” Canovan, *A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 212.

⁴²¹ Passerin d'Entrèves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, 85.

⁴²² Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy*, 177.

However, rather than attempting to incorporate all of Arendt's disparate lines of argument into a single model, it is more productive to concede that Arendt's understanding of freedom develops throughout her life and can only be understood through an evolutionary analysis that treats each text as containing its own specific perspective. Although Arendt continually builds on her previous ideas, the analysis of freedom in each text often depends on its unique position within a constellation of other concepts and the particular aspect of freedom that Arendt wishes to accentuate therein. This evolutionary interpretive position has been adopted by Andreas Kalyvas who argues that in *On Revolution* "freedom was now defined less in terms of individual performance and virtuosity and more as a collective capacity to initiate new political beginnings and to deliberately participate in the extraordinary founding of new constitutions."⁴²⁴ Arendt's mature understanding of freedom emerges in *On Revolution* in a considerably altered model from her earlier formulations. It is in this text that Arendt develops a notion of political freedom in relation to her understanding of modern revolutions and participation in the public realm. The older expressivist account is not entirely superseded, but it is reorganised within a more explicitly political understanding. However, Kalyvas overemphasises the moment of the extraordinary in Arendt and overlooks the fact that her account of political freedom rests predominantly on the regular, everyday participation of citizens in the business of democratic politics.⁴²⁵ I argue that Arendt's conception of freedom in *On Revolution* is based on a radical participatory ideal of citizens engaging in direct forms of deliberation and decision-making. Freedom in this sense is exercised as an ongoing activity that must be continually reasserted against countervailing forces of entropy and domination. I will proceed to show how she arrived at such a model.

Arendt's re-examination of the major concepts of the tradition of political thought following the publication of *The Human Condition* contributes to the development of her understanding of freedom. A number of these reflections which inform her later position in *On Revolution* are published as "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future*. In this essay, Arendt distinguishes freedom from other related concepts with which it is often confused. Freedom, for Arendt, is not the product of an individual free will nor is it the inner feeling of self-sovereignty and mastery. She argues that such an unworldly and apolitical account of freedom arose only after political freedom as an established fact had disappeared from the world in late

⁴²³ Alan Keenan, "Promises, Promises: The Abyss of Freedom and the Loss of the Political in the Work of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* (1994) 22 (2), 297–322, 298.

⁴²⁴ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 201–202.

⁴²⁵ Ibid; Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 76–77; Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 4.

antiquity during the Roman Empire.⁴²⁶ Freedom in Arendt's use of the term requires its manifestation and worldly disclosure in a public realm. It relies upon the establishment of a space of appearances between plural human beings within which they can act collectively. Secondly, freedom should not be confused with an act of liberation. Liberation – both from the necessities of life and from the arbitrary rule of despots – is a necessary pre-requisite to freedom but should not be mistaken for freedom itself.⁴²⁷ Liberation from an oppressive system usually precedes the foundation of a new political regime, but it is possible to undertake the former without achieving the latter. Thirdly, Arendt distinguishes political freedom from civil liberties, which are the negative rights of individuals living under a constitutional government. Civil liberties protect individuals' private lives from coercion and domination but do not create a public realm within which they can act.⁴²⁸ Arendt attempts to establish a more politically oriented and public understanding of freedom that goes beyond the individual and negative liberties of the liberal tradition. However, one should not equate Arendt's criticisms of Christian and liberal accounts of freedom with an acceptance of Isaiah Berlin's notion of positive liberty as self-mastery and control.⁴²⁹ Arendt prefers to emphasise the plural nature of human beings whereby freedom is a condition that only arises when individuals are engaged in joint political enterprises. Freedom is not an act of self-mastery, but a collective practice of a self-governing community. Finally, Arendt is unequivocal about the close correlation between freedom and action. She states that "the *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action."⁴³⁰ People express and actualise their freedom through action with their political equals. As Arendt argues, "men *are* free ... as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same."⁴³¹ These analyses lay the groundwork for her discussion of political freedom in *On Revolution*.

As Arendt announces in its opening pages, the fate of the concept of freedom is one of the central concerns of *On Revolution*. The French and American revolutions are the context in which Arendt develops her richest account of political freedom. For Arendt, the modern concept of revolution is inextricably bound both to the idea of a new beginning in history and to the emergence of political freedom. A revolution is an exemplary political act that manifests a number of the intrinsic qualities of freedom: it is spontaneous, non-rule-governed,

⁴²⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future* 146–148.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 148; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 19–20; Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 148.

⁴²⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 134.

⁴²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴³⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 146.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 153.

enacts a rupture with the past and demonstrates the highest human capacity to begin something new. It is also the necessary precondition for the establishment of a permanent and lasting order within which freedom can appear. For Arendt, freedom is the goal and end point of modern revolutions. It is also for her the single most important principle of the political realm.⁴³² Arendt approvingly quotes Condorcet: “the word ‘revolutionary’ can be applied only to revolutions whose aim is freedom.”⁴³³ The goal of a modern revolution is not merely liberation from an old regime but the explicit constitution and founding of a new political form. It requires constitution making, the enacting of new political institutions, the framing of new laws and the creation of a new political culture and values.⁴³⁴

However, in spite of the important connections between revolution, new beginnings and freedom, the dominant image of political freedom in *On Revolution* is not one of founding, based on a model of making, but rather of plural human action. Throughout the book, freedom is increasingly defined less in terms of a miraculous event – a singular act that radically breaks with all previous causes – and more in terms of an ongoing experience and a collective project of autonomous politics.⁴³⁵ In her first direct reference to the meaning of freedom itself, Arendt describes the “content of freedom” as “participation in public affairs, or admission to the public realm.”⁴³⁶ Freedom is defined as the taking part and sharing in the daily affairs of the body politic. In a second explicit definition, Arendt agrees with Jefferson that “political freedom, generally speaking, means the right ‘to be a participator in government’, or it means nothing.”⁴³⁷ Both of these statements draw attention to what Arendt views as the core substance of political freedom: a regime could only be described as free in Arendt’s use of the term if it provides an institutionalised space for the active participation of citizens in forms of deliberation and decision-making.

Participation is not simply a matter of voting in electoral institutions or being a member of a political party or trade union. Arendt refers to practices in which the people themselves “could become visible and be of significance,” decision-making processes in which they have

⁴³² Arendt states in a panel discussion that “I do believe that freedom is about the most important principle of all political life.” Arendt, “The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act?” Arendt Papers, 014382.

⁴³³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 19.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 119.

⁴³⁵ This mirrors Arendt’s analysis of the shift in understanding of freedom in “Introduction into Politics” from the Homeric adventurous enterprise to the everyday living and speaking with others within a *polis* as the “real substance of a free life.” Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 124.

⁴³⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 22.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 210.

some degree of genuine control over decisions that affect them.⁴³⁸ This is not mere consultation or a symbolic presence in non-binding advisory councils. The people say: “We want to participate, we want to debate, we want to make our voices heard in public, and we want to have a possibility to determine the political course of our country.”⁴³⁹ Arendt imagines a wholesale shift away from “a form of government where the few rule, at least supposedly, in the interest of the many” and where “public freedom” is “the privilege of the few.”⁴⁴⁰ True political freedom would require “the people *qua* people to make their entrance into political life and to become participators in government.”⁴⁴¹ Arendt’s vision is of a self-determining political community in which a right to participate directly in the affairs of actual processes of governance is institutionalised for all members of society. She refers to the “good fortune” of the Americans’ “widespread experience with self-government” prior to the revolution, which they gained from participating in local, decentralised, self-governing communities.⁴⁴² For Arendt, the appearance of freedom is the result and correlative of the day-to-day activities of politics. It is the “speech-making and decision-making, the oratory and the business, the thinking and the persuading, and the actual doing” that constitute the “experience of being free.”⁴⁴³ In other words, the “expressing, discussing, and deciding” which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom.⁴⁴⁴ At this level of generality, Arendt’s value of political freedom does not specify the precise nature of exactly how often and in which particular formats citizens should participate in government. She admits that “by no means every resident of a country” would have to participate constantly, but it is important that every member “be given the opportunity” to participate in some meaningful way.⁴⁴⁵ Political participation is a principle that would require further elaboration in an institutional design and could be embodied in a number of different ways that would still fulfil its primary criteria. In the following chapter, I address how the principle of political freedom is actualised in the institutional structure of Arendt’s council system.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁴³⁹ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 233.

⁴⁴⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 261.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 269.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 156.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 235.

⁴⁴⁵ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 233.

II. Empowerment

Empowerment entails the development of a community's ability to self-govern as a result of greater knowledge, skills and capacities.⁴⁴⁶ In the following, I argue that empowerment is one of the core political principles of Arendt's council system because the councils both generate power between citizens and assist in its preservation within stable institutions. While previous interpretations of Arendt's concept of power have focused on its communicative and linguistic dimensions, I highlight its neglected organisational and stabilising functions.⁴⁴⁷ Central to my argument is Arendt's claim that the councils "had begun to establish an entirely new power structure in the midst of revolution."⁴⁴⁸ She describes the councils as the development of an alternative power structure that arose alongside and partly in opposition to existing institutional sources of power within a political regime. The councils therefore challenged the legitimacy of other political institutions as they began to take on political and administrative responsibilities. The emergence of the councils in Russia and Germany opened periods of "dual power" in which the legitimacy of state institutions was challenged and a struggle for power arose between competing institutions. This aspect of the councils as a potentially alternative power centre has not been sufficiently examined in the existing secondary literature. Focusing on this role of the councils sheds light on their distinctive character in Arendt's work. To further elucidate this point requires a discussion of Arendt's unique conception of political power.

In comparison to the concept of power, the term empowerment is located less frequently within studies of Arendt's work.⁴⁴⁹ This lack of attention is partly due to the proximity of notions of empowerment to an idea of sovereign mastery and control, which Arendt associates with forms of domination and the attempt to escape the contingent and unpredictable aspects of the human condition.⁴⁵⁰ Arendt considered that sovereignty, as it has been understood

⁴⁴⁶ Empowerment also has diverse meanings across different discourses. For an overview see Paul Barry Clarke and Joe Foweraker (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2001) 273–277.

⁴⁴⁷ See Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power"; Leo Penta, "Hannah Arendt: On Power," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (1996) 10 (3), 210–229.

⁴⁴⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 249.

⁴⁴⁹ See Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*, 92, 122, 141; Nancy C. M. Hartscock, *Money, Sex and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985) 222; Seyla Benhabib, "Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's Concept of Public Space," *History of the Human Sciences* (1993) 6 (2), 97–114, 99.

⁴⁵⁰ She claims that "the identification of freedom with sovereignty is perhaps the most pernicious and dangerous consequence of the philosophical equation of freedom and free will." Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 164. For a more sceptical analysis of Arendt's critique of sovereignty see Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen, "Banishing the

through a long history of absolute monarchy, “allegedly demanded undivided centralized power,” which “seemed in contradiction to the establishment of a republic.”⁴⁵¹ However, a distinction can be drawn between sovereignty as absolute command and a community’s ability to self-govern and create their own laws. The latter is of great importance to Arendt since it is essential to the creation of a free republic.

Arendt departs from the classic definition of power as unilateral domination, i.e. control over the actions of another.⁴⁵² Her own views on power are a mixture of a capacities-based approach combined with a stabilising and organisational dimension to power that is rarely included in traditional classifications. For Arendt, power emerges when people come together in speech and action. She argues that power will always have a “potential” character as something that can be “actualized but never fully materialized.”⁴⁵³ It is a positive capacity to act that “springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”⁴⁵⁴ From this perspective, Arendt’s conception of power appears similar to other Spinozist-inspired definitions of *potentia* as a democratic and creative “power-to” or “power from below” that arises between citizens through democratic politics. For Arendt, “power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly-in-between space by which men are mutually related.”⁴⁵⁵ From the French resistance to the American student movement, her political writings continually explore the development of power between agents as they act in concert.

However, there is another aspect to her understanding of power that can easily be missed. While power vanishes the moment human beings disperse, it does linger after a political action as that which “keeps the public realm ... in existence.”⁴⁵⁶ There is a second, often overlooked, dimension to Arendtian power as a force that preserves and enhances a political

Sovereign? Internal and External Sovereignty in Arendt,” *Constellations* (2009) 16 (2), 307–330; Ian Zuckerman, “Sovereignty and Democracy: Critique and Reconstruction,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 2006; Martel, “Can There Be Politics Without Sovereignty? Arendt, Derrida and the Question of Sovereign Inevitability,” 153.

⁴⁵¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 14.

⁴⁵² Weber defines power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in position to carry out his own will despite resistance.” Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of an Interpretative Sociology*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978) 53.

⁴⁵³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200. See also Arendt’s summary in a course on Montesquieu “All this means: Power is a potentiality.” Arendt, “Courses, University of California Berkeley, Calif. History of Political Theory, lectures, Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, baron de, 1955,” Arendt Papers, 024185.

⁴⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

⁴⁵⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 167.

⁴⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

community's future capacity to act. Arendt's idiosyncratic definition of power defines not a substance – something that one could possess, store or deploy – but rather a condition of effective relationality between actors. It describes a state of affairs in which different actors are comported towards one another in a manner that cultivates and preserves the possibility of collective action.⁴⁵⁷

These two dimensions of Arendt's conception of power are interconnected. On the one hand, power is that which emerges simultaneously with human action as its medium and milieu. Power forges new relationships and networks that foster and support political action. The exercise of individuals' capacities as self-governing agents allows a political community to transform itself, "establish relations and create new realities."⁴⁵⁸ On the other hand, "power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence."⁴⁵⁹ Power preserves the capacity for future action by holding open and preserving the possibility of its continuation. It is what "keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed."⁴⁶⁰ By this Arendt means that networks and alliances have been established that do not immediately disappear but remain potential sources of future possible action. She contends that political power contains an aspect of what we might today call "organization."⁴⁶¹ Once engendered through action, power contains its own "mechanisms ... through which new power is constantly generated."⁴⁶² It is able to grow between political actors and strengthen the bonds of solidarity within a community. In this sense, active participation in the public realm creates the conditions for its own continuation and expansion through the generation of power between plural agents. A process of empowerment, for Arendt, describes both the ability of citizens to take part in genuine and meaningful processes of governance in addition to the creation of more organised and capable networks of citizens who have the knowledge and capacity to act together effectively.⁴⁶³

⁴⁵⁷ Patchen Markell describes this through a concept of "power-after." See Patchen Markell, "The Moment Has Passed: Power After Arendt," in Rom Coles, Mark Reinhardt, and George Shulman (eds.), *Radical Future Pasts: Untimely Political Theory* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

⁴⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 201.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 143.

⁴⁶³ Arendt's emphasis on the importance of the power of political communities can be traced to her experience of disempowerment and exile as a Jew fleeing from fascist Germany. See Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*, 6.

This conception of empowerment embodied within the council form can be contrasted with both the disempowerment of liberal institutions and the equally problematic unilateral seizure of power by a revolutionary vanguard party. To explain this more fully, let us consider how the councils first established themselves as new structures of power during the course of the revolution. They generated power through the active participation of citizens in public affairs and by organising them into political bodies. For Arendt, “[p]ower is engendered by any group of people that organizes itself and acts in concert.”⁴⁶⁴ This aspect of the councils is essential for Arendt because it provides a remedy to the great deficit of power that affects contemporary liberal democracies. Her most substantive criticism of the American Revolution was that it failed to incorporate the councils as new institutions of power in the post-revolutionary constitutional regime. Without any concrete institution within which citizens could exercise power, the principle that power lies with the people rings hollow. The town-hall meetings, in Arendt’s narrative of the American revolutionary experience, allowed for ordinary citizens to regularly assemble and address issues of common concern. They were “spaces of freedom” where people could participate in political debate and decision-making.⁴⁶⁵ In this way, they provided an avenue of participation for ordinary citizens unable to take part in parliamentary institutions.

Secondly, Arendt, like Luxemburg, was acutely aware of the dangers of a misshapen revolution. As alternative structures of power, the councils play a different role in revolutionary situations from a vanguard political party. Arendt contrasts the purpose of the councils with the Marxist-Leninist theory of the revolutionary party, which aimed to take over state power and direct it towards revolutionary ends. There is a fundamental difference between the “openly proclaimed revolutionary goals of the Bolshevik Party to ‘seize power’” and the strategy of the councils.⁴⁶⁶ The Bolsheviks conceived of revolution as a means of toppling the government and seizing the central political apparatuses of the state. They viewed this as a way to gain control over the means of violence in order to transform the state through political force. Arendt is critical of this strategy because it replicates the hierarchical structure of the state in the institutions that are designed to replace it. Her criticism is based on the insight that a just society cannot be imposed on people from above but must be the result of their own organisational impulses. Arendt follows Luxemburg in claiming that “the nature

⁴⁶⁴ Arendt, “The Impotence of Power,” Arendt Papers, 014392.

⁴⁶⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 256.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

of new societies is affected by the nature of the actions that bring them into being.”⁴⁶⁷ Rather than produce new emancipatory institutions with alternative models of power, the Bolsheviks took over and intensified many of the pre-revolutionary apparatuses of the state. The councils, on the other hand, are institutions of empowerment, which are designed for the purpose of generating and increasing the political capacities of ordinary citizens. In the next chapter, I demonstrate how Arendt’s principle of empowerment is embodied in the institutional framework of her conception of a council democracy. I argue that Arendt’s councils arise as alternative institutional arrangements to the central political institutions of a regime due to their different model of political power.

III. Federalism

For Arendt, a third important principle of the council system, alongside the freedom and empowerment of citizens, is the development of a federal structure of government. As it is traditionally understood in political and constitutional theory, federalism involves the division of power between member units and a larger common government.⁴⁶⁸ Although at some points in her later work Arendt associates the federal principle with a division of powers within government,⁴⁶⁹ the majority of her references are to a principle according to which “constituted political bodies can combine and enter into lasting alliances without losing their identity.”⁴⁷⁰ Arendt conceives of federalism as a system whereby, without relying on a concept of sovereignty, political communities can make binding agreements with one another and still retain a degree of independence and political equality. It can be distinguished from a *confederal* system in which member units retain complete sovereign control and the confederal body can only proceed with the voluntary cooperation of each member unit.⁴⁷¹ A

⁴⁶⁷ Arendt, “The Impotence of Power,” Arendt Papers, 014374.

⁴⁶⁸ Ronald L. Watts, “Federalism, Federal Political Systems, and Federations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* (1998) 1, 117–137. For different types of federalism see Ernest A. Young, “The Puzzling Persistence of Dual Federalism,” in James E. Fleming and Jacob T. Levy (eds.), *Federalism and Subsidiarity* (New York: NYU Press, 2014) 34–82.

⁴⁶⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 237.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 162. In a course Arendt delivered in 1955 she distinguishes between Montesquieu’s division between the three powers: “Federalist concept: Division of power is based upon territorial states against Federal Government. Tyranny would be if Federal government assumes all power.” Arendt, “Courses, University of California Berkeley, Calif. History of Political Theory, lectures, Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, baron de, 1955,” Arendt Papers, 024190.

⁴⁷¹ Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (London: University College London Press, 1992) 177. Bookchin departs from most anarchist writers on the subject of unilateral disassociation from a confederal political system, agreeing with Arendt that allowing for such a choice

federal arrangement, on the other hand, can produce decisions that are binding on member units if the correct law-making procedure is followed.

Arendt adopts the federal principle to argue for the redistribution and dispersion of power, authority and resources from a central government to intermediary and lower levels.⁴⁷² Her model of a council system entails a layered and graduated federal network of councils, which “begins from below, continues upward, and finally leads to a parliament.”⁴⁷³ It attempts to balance the important normative claims of autonomy and self-government with the practical issues of co-ordination and joint activity. In pursuing the first claim, Arendt envisages not simply the delegation of certain administrative functions but a full devolution of structures of power combined with the resources to implement decisions to local councils. She argues that councils should be entrusted “with extensive powers of local self-government.”⁴⁷⁴ Arendt understands this as a process of empowerment, allowing ordinary citizens to have a greater influence over the formulation and implementation of laws and policies. It is also able to “act as a safeguard against accumulation of power” by a central authority.⁴⁷⁵ On the other hand, Arendt wishes to ensure that units are connected through horizontal networks of communication, accountability and resource sharing. Local councils should have significant discretion and decision-making power, but this need not entail a form of “localism” where small communities are completely self-reliant and autonomous. Arendt was attentive to the dangers of simply breaking up larger units into a number of smaller ones, which in Germany “assumed a hopelessly reactionary character” and, far from guaranteeing a more democratic politics, risked leading to exclusivity and parochialism.⁴⁷⁶ A federal structure allows for knowledge and resources to be transmitted across the system, enabling a wider process of social learning.

would undermine the entire system. Murray Bookchin, “Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview,” *Society & Nature* (1992) 1 (1), 1–12;

⁴⁷² Participatory theorists have argued that significant processes of decentralisation must occur as a necessary condition of participatory democracy. See Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Patrick Heller and Marcelo K. Silva (eds.), *Bootstrapping Democracy: Transforming Local Governance and Civil Society in Brazil* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). Robert Dahl has also argued that democratic politics functions most effectively at the level of the city. Robert Dahl, “The City in the Future of Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* (1967) 61 (4), 953–970.

⁴⁷³ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 189.

⁴⁷⁴ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 267.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

The notions of federalism, federal political systems and federations are provided with a number of conceptual distinctions in the literature.⁴⁷⁷ Thus, it is important to properly delineate the distinctive aspects of Arendt's variety of federalism. First, she views a federal system as an alternative to sovereignty and the nation-state.⁴⁷⁸ Patrick Riley argues that federalism can most plausibly be described as having arisen from the sixteenth century onwards in opposition to and as an alternative to the concept of sovereign states.⁴⁷⁹ The great contradiction of most theories of federalism is that they mistakenly tend to defend themselves through a reliance on a concept of the sovereignty of their individual territorial units. By falling back on the very concept that federalism criticises for suppressing local autonomy, it unwittingly entrenches the dominance of a sovereign paradigm. For Riley, "it would have done better to try to *overturn* the idea of sovereignty."⁴⁸⁰ For most federalists, from Madison and Hamilton onwards, federalism is a particular organisational structure of a sovereign nation-state. It has advantages and disadvantages when compared to other such organisational forms, but it ultimately remains a subspecies of the dominant state system. Thus, many federations such as the United States, Canada, Germany and Australia are still sovereign states in the international system. Arendt holds a minority view – a more radical concept of federalism that challenges the concept of sovereign nation-states as a foundational model of organising politics.

The grounds of Arendt's aversion to sovereignty are obvious enough. Sovereignty is the assertion of a claim to absolute command and authority within a given territorial entity. This sovereign command is located in a singular organ and unfettered by restrictions of law. The discourse of sovereignty is associated for her with a regime of domination and the attempt to escape contingent and unpredictable aspects of the human condition. Sovereignty, as it was understood through a long history of absolute monarchy, "allegedly demanded undivided centralized power," which "seemed in contradiction to the establishment of a republic."⁴⁸¹ She claims that "the identification of freedom with sovereignty is perhaps the most pernicious and

⁴⁷⁷ Watts, "Federalism, Federal Political Systems and Federations"; Daniel J. Elazar, "Federalism," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 356–361.

⁴⁷⁸ Douglas Klusmeyer, "Hannah Arendt's Case for Federalism," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* (2009) 40 (1), 31–58.

⁴⁷⁹ Patrick Riley, "The Origins of Federal Theory in International Relations Ideas," *Polity* (1973) 6 (1), 87–112. Riley argues that it is to Leibniz and Hugo rather than Madison and Hamilton that we should turn for a more adequate understanding of federalism.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁸¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 14.

dangerous consequence of the philosophical equation of freedom and free will.”⁴⁸² Arendt puts forward a theory of politics and freedom that attempts to avoid questions of sovereignty as the basis of a political society. Commentators have criticised Arendt’s one-dimensional analysis of sovereignty inherited from Schmitt and have argued that she was not attentive to distinctions between “state” and “organ” sovereignty or its substantive and relational dimensions.⁴⁸³ Many of these criticisms are perceptive and accurate, but I cannot treat them in detail here. Instead, I want to focus on Arendt’s assessment of the pernicious effects of the concept of sovereignty. It is this point that is most relevant for the topic of the council system. While at points she seems to grant a certain “limited reality” to sovereignty, her main goal is to redirect our political imaginary to alternative frameworks of practicing politics.⁴⁸⁴ The essence of most of her references to sovereignty is a critique of a unifying logic that attempts to reduce a plurality of voices to a singular instance of representation. “Sovereignty,” Arendt argues “can only be achieved by the many bound together.”⁴⁸⁵ The concept of sovereignty relies on a notion of the unitary will and an ideal of mastery.⁴⁸⁶ She is concerned about the reductive effects of a mode of politics which consists in the presumption of and striving towards a single, unified will expressed through an executive organ. She wishes to preserve an open space for the exchange of opinion that would not be pre-emptively closed by the claim of a unified will and singular unquestionable identity.

Arendt also considers federalism “the sole alternative to the nation-state principle.”⁴⁸⁷ It is through her conception of federalism that Arendt seeks “a new state concept” outside of the framework of the nation state, the rudiments of which lie in “the federal principle.”⁴⁸⁸ Arendt’s initial criticisms emerged through her reflections on Jewish politics, which crystallised into a strong critique of the nation-state system that was steadfast throughout her

⁴⁸² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 164.

⁴⁸³ Arato and Cohen, “Banishing the Sovereign? Internal and External Sovereignty in Arendt”; Zuckerman, “Sovereignty and Democracy: Critique and Reconstruction”; Martel, “Can There Be Politics Without Sovereignty? Arendt, Derrida and the Question of Sovereign Inevitability”.

⁴⁸⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 245. There are moments in her work where Arendt’s critique of sovereignty is more ambiguous. See Martel, “*Amo: Volo ut sis*: Love, Willing and Arendt’s Reluctant Embrace of Sovereignty,” 287.

⁴⁸⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 245.

⁴⁸⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Freedom and Politics: A Lecture,” *Chicago Review* (1960) 14 (1), 28–46, 40, n 5.

⁴⁸⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 166.

⁴⁸⁸ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 188. Although see Arato and Cohen on Arendt’s distinction between internal and external sovereignty, which allows for a concept of sovereignty in the sphere of international relations. Arato and Cohen, “Banishing the Sovereign? Internal and External Sovereignty in Arendt”.

life.⁴⁸⁹ She witnessed the “catastrophic decline of the national-state system” following the dramatic redrawing of borders after the First World War and the creation of many new states with mixed populations.⁴⁹⁰ As the nation-state was not suited to these new territorial entities, it resulted in internal problems of coerced assimilation of minorities and external issues of a reliance on war to achieve the political ends of state sovereignty. In “*Nationalstaat und Demokratie*” Arendt addresses the issue of whether the nation-state is compatible with democracy. If by democracy we understand “active participation in public matters, and not only the protection of certain fundamental rights,” then it is clear that the nation-state stands in tension with democratic ambitions because of its centralised power structure.⁴⁹¹ Arendt argues that “real democracy, however - and this is perhaps in this context the decisive factor - can only exist where the centralisation of power in the nation-state is broken and in its place is put the federative system, proper to which is the diffusion of power in many power centres.”⁴⁹²

Second, federalism is an attempt to pluralise political space and displace state- and government-centric conceptions of politics. For Arendt, a proliferation of political action and participation demands a wider dispersal of institutions in which it can take place. It involves moving beyond a focus on the national executive and legislative government as the sole organ and institutionalised space of political action. The problem with many conventional theories of democracy is that they rely on an image of a democratic polity based on a single organ of government and a concept of the unified people as a rule-bound electorate. A federal system allows multiple constituent institutions to operate simultaneously on a graduated level of political responsibility and accountability. Arendt calls for “a new type of republican government which would rest on ‘elementary republics’ in such a way that its own central power did not deprive the constituent bodies of their original power to constitute.”⁴⁹³ It permits a more active conceptualisation of the people, not simply as an abstract entity evoked by those in power, but as an active political subject. She contrasted the federal principle with the “national principle,” according to which “there must be one representative of the nation as a whole, and where the government is understood to incorporate the will of all

⁴⁸⁹ On the complexities of Arendt’s critique of the nation-state see Christian Volk, “The Decline of Order: Hannah Arendt and the Paradoxes of the Nation-State,” in Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 172–197. Volk highlights Arendt’s concern with the decline of an order of nation-states and their impracticality in a globalised world.

⁴⁹⁰ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 371.

⁴⁹¹ Arendt, *Nationalstaat und Demokratie* (my translation).

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 259.

nationals.”⁴⁹⁴ The competing conceptions of federalism and the nation-state are lucidly presented in Arendt’s narrative of the French and American revolutions. The American “elementary republics” of the pre-federation era are depicted as a superior model to the centralising tendencies of the Jacobin party during the French Revolution. Arendt praises the French revolutionary societies as centres of political action, but these nascent institutions were crushed by the Jacobin government. The dispute, as Arendt presents it, was a “fight of the government’s monopoly of power against the federal principle with its separation and division of power, that is, the fight of the nation-state against the first beginnings of a true republic.”⁴⁹⁵ Under the pretence of representing the sovereignty of the nation, the Jacobins deprived the people of their power to constitute and quashed the federal principle as a living reality in continental Europe.

Next, Arendt considered that the federal system would rejuvenate local democracy against increasing forces of centralisation. She was critical of progressivist tendencies within the United States, who, over the course of the twentieth century, argued for more centralisation in order to increase the nation’s power.⁴⁹⁶ The dim result of this process according to Arendt was that “centralization does not work.”⁴⁹⁷ Although Arendt felt that centralised institutions would be best to deal with what Engels called the “administration of things,” they posed a great danger to democracy because of centralisation’s disempowering effects.⁴⁹⁸ Centralisation tended to take decision-making power out of the hands of local communities and into larger government bureaucracies. Arendt’s support for local processes of democratisation is first evident in her analysis of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Her proposed solution to the issue was a federal state with a common government for the two peoples. The most distinctive feature of Arendt’s schema was that this federated structure rested on “Jewish-Arab community councils,” which she argued would assist the conflict to be resolved “on the lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighborliness.”⁴⁹⁹ Arendt imagines these councils “on a small scale and as numerous as possible,” which would comprise an independent tier of “local

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 162–163.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁹⁶ Recent experiences of municipal politics in Latin America have confirmed Arendt’s insistence on the practical necessity of decentralisation in order to foster greater levels of participation and empowerment. New forms of participatory budgeting were enabled by a new Brazilian Constitution in 1988 that devolved power to municipal governments and provided greater resources for implementing policies at the mayoral level. See Benjamin Goldfrank, *Deepening Local Democracy in Latin America: Participation, Decentralisation and the Left* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

⁴⁹⁷ Arendt, “The Impotence of Power,” Arendt Papers, 023421.

⁴⁹⁸ Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 328.

⁴⁹⁹ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 400.

self-government” and act as the starting point for a broader system of federated councils. She was a constant supporter of local self-governance, arguing that “it would teach grass-roots democracy in the field of communal or local affairs where people had their immediate interests and were supposed to know the ropes.”⁵⁰⁰ She contended that America “has had an especially long and solid tradition” in processes of “direct local democracy via the town hall.”⁵⁰¹ One of the key objectives of Arendt’s council system was to cultivate these local forms of democratic action against the centralising tendencies of modern nation-states.

Fourth, Arendt maintains an ambiguous relationship with the American Federalist tradition of Madison and Hamilton. Lisa Disch highlights Arendt’s curious position in relation to the federalist debates: “her narrative of the American Founding puts forward Anti-Federalist *arguments* while shoring up Federalist *ideology*.”⁵⁰² Arendt appears to either misunderstand or ignore the fact that the Federalists were in favour of centralising national systems and were generally sceptical of popular participation in politics.⁵⁰³ Madison’s arguments for a republic as opposed to a democracy were primarily aimed at limiting the dangers of self-government, popular mobilisation and direct democracy.⁵⁰⁴ Arendt’s narrative of the American Revolution in *On Revolution* takes a quintessentially Federalist line whilst in substance defending anti-Federalist concepts of decentralisation and self-government.⁵⁰⁵ Rather than criticise the original Founders for their elitist and aristocratic understanding of the concept of representation, Arendt points to their lack of conceptual clarity and the negative effects of a European tradition from which they could not completely detach themselves.⁵⁰⁶ Arendt’s council system appears significantly more decentralised and autonomous than the conception of the Federalists and the institutional arrangements of current federations such as the United States of America. Her support for the Federalists can be understood in a variety of ways, but

⁵⁰⁰ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 267.

⁵⁰¹ Arendt, “The Impotence of Power,” Arendt Papers, 014410.

⁵⁰² Disch, “How could Hannah Arendt Glorify the American Revolution and Revile the French? Placing *On Revolution* in the Historiography of the French and American Revolutions”.

⁵⁰³ Although Madison, Hamilton and Jay proposed a federal model, they were sceptical of the benefits of decentralisation (Federalist 37). They argued for the centralisation of defence and commerce powers (Federalist 11, 23) and the direct applicability of central laws to individuals (Federalist 16). Madison was also staunchly opposed to concepts of direct democracy and self-government, which he considered vulnerable to factional strife (Federalist 10). See Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. C. Rossiter (New York: Penguin, 1961).

⁵⁰⁴ Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–89* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1969) 562.

⁵⁰⁵ The “Anti-federalists” were against excessive centralisation and feared that a national government would usurp the powers of the constituent units. They doubted whether a nation of such size would permit the deliberation and decision-making of individual citizens on issues of local concern.

⁵⁰⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 195.

what is clear is the significant difference between the position of the American Founders and Arendt's conception of a council republic. This distinction is easily lost due to Arendt's largely positive treatment of the Federalists in *On Revolution* and the contradictions of her analysis of the American Revolution.

In fact, Arendt's federal system seems to bear more of a resemblance to an anarchist form of federalism from Proudhon to Bookchin.⁵⁰⁷ She shares their emphasis on self-government, decentralisation and a critique of the nation-state system. She also links federalism to notions of popular participation and citizen control. For Arendt, the federal principle "came to the fore only in the spontaneous organizational efforts of the people themselves."⁵⁰⁸ Federalism as a form of political organisation was particularly attractive to people when left free to organise themselves, which highlighted for Arendt "the intimate connection between the spirit of revolution and the principle of federation."⁵⁰⁹ The similarities cannot be overstated, however, as Arendt shows little sympathy for anarchist ideology and draws a distinction between political matters and socio-economic concerns, which runs counter to the anarchist tradition.⁵¹⁰

Arendt puts forward a radical form of federalism that is inseparable from her conceptions of political freedom and empowerment. These three central principles together constitute the basic political values of the council system. In this chapter, I have put forward a particular interpretation of Arendt's political theory from the perspective of the council system that accentuates the participatory and empowered dimensions of her thought. Each of the principles I have explicated above contributes to rethinking the basic principles of current liberal democratic governments. They serve as useful normative standards for considering possible reforms and guiding discussion towards a more substantive and robust conception of democracy. Although the principles do not constitute a complete alternative model of democracy, they do provide a number of critical angles from which one can interrogate existing democratic regimes. The next chapter continues my interpretation of Arendt's

⁵⁰⁷ Proudhon, *The Principle of Federation*; Murray Bookchin, "The Meaning of Confederalism," *Green Perspectives* (November 1989) 20. Bookchin supports a more decentralised form of confederalism, which has been discussed above.

⁵⁰⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 238.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁵¹⁰ It is most likely that Arendt's federalism was based initially on her reading of Montesquieu rather than anything in the anarchist tradition. In *The Spirit of Laws* (Book 9, 1) Montesquieu argues for a confederal political organisation that seeks to combine the advantages of small and large political units without taking on the disadvantages of either.

political theory, shifting from an analysis of the core normative principles of the council system to a detailed examination of its institutional structure.

Chapter 4: The Institutional Design of Arendt's Council Democracy

In addition to the political principles examined in the previous chapter, Arendt also sketches a rough framework of how such principles could be embodied in an institutional form. Yet, Arendt was not inclined to create detailed institutional blueprints or engage in system building in her writing. As a result, much ambiguity surrounds her brief sketches of a council system. Furthermore, Arendt abruptly halts her institutional analysis without providing a detailed assessment of the council system's realistic prospects as a permanent system of government. One possible reason she gives for her reluctance to pursue the matter further is her claim in an interview that "important studies on this subject have been published in recent years in Germany and France and anyone seriously interested can inform himself."⁵¹¹ The remark is puzzling, however, since Arendt does not cite any articles. It is also not immediately clear from the available historical evidence to which studies she was referring. While some historical work has been undertaken on the councils, very little of it has adopted Arendt's particular interpretation. If we wish to understand the possible institutional schema of Arendt's council system we must examine the brief remarks scattered throughout her works on the topic, in particular those on the final pages of *On Revolution*.

In this chapter, I reconstruct Arendt's proposed institutional design of a council system from her texts and interviews and analyse its strengths and limitations for democratic theory. The perceived marginality of the council system in Arendt's work has prevented rigorous analysis of its institutional framework. Commentators usually point out its obvious flaws without further scrutiny of why the model was so important to Arendt and of the ways in which it embodied her central political values. One of the chief aims of this chapter is to fill this gap by pursuing a detailed examination that takes Arendt seriously on the councils but remains critical of her claims and attentive to the historical realities in which any proposed council system would have to operate.⁵¹² While chapter three developed the central principles of Arendt's councils as a critical perspective on current liberal democratic regimes, chapter four adopts a more sceptical attitude towards Arendt's writings on the councils in examining her

⁵¹¹ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 235.

⁵¹² Of those who take Arendt seriously on the councils, another possible error has been to be too lenient on the weaknesses of Arendt's proposal. For examples of such an interpretation see Totschnig, "Arendt's Argument for the Council System: A Defense"; Lederman, "Councils and Revolution: Participatory Democracy in Anarchist Thought and the New Social Movements".

institutional design. This is due to the fact that I turn from an outline of desirable political principles to analyse the difficulties of realising these principles within Arendt's proposed institutions.

Within the existing literature, two divergent interpretations of the council system have prevailed, both of which, I argue, fail to capture what is distinctive about Arendt's proposal. On the one hand, Margaret Canovan contends that the councils can be understood as a call for the rejuvenation of American democracy and could serve as an "intermediate institutional structure that would connect the citizen to government."⁵¹³ In Canovan's reading, the councils are relegated to a supplementary position within existing liberal institutions. The second line of interpretation views Arendt as rejecting all forms of representation outright and succumbing to a desire for a more immediate and direct form of democracy. In this vein, there has been an ongoing trend of interpreting Arendt as a supporter of a naïve form of direct or unmediated politics, either by way of the charge of "polis envy," or the claim of a hidden "metaphysics of presence" that naturally leads to direct democracy.⁵¹⁴

I depart from both of these classic narratives. The councils are neither exclusively an element of civil society nor a return to Athenian democracy. Arendt's articulation of democratic institutions circumvents the traditional immediate/mediated and direct/representative divisions.⁵¹⁵ Cutting across this conventional debate, Arendt proposes an alternative *to* liberal representative democracy that remains *within* the realm of democracy and representative government.⁵¹⁶ The council system entails the transformation of state institutions towards a new model of a federal council state. In my interpretation, Arendt's councils are shown to represent an alternative power structure that poses a challenge to traditional top-down models of state power. Building on my analysis of Arendt's political principle of empowerment in

⁵¹³ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 235; Isaac, "Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics".

⁵¹⁴ George Kateb, "Arendt and Representative Democracy," *Salmagundi* (1983) 60, 20–59; Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*, 69; Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (London: Polity Press, 1988); Visker, "Beyond Representation and Participation"; Menga, "The Seduction of Radical Democracy: Deconstructing Hannah Arendt's Political Discourse".

⁵¹⁵ Even Arendt's radical interpreters still can interpret her through these categories. See, for example, Ferdinando G. Menga: "I believe – is nothing other than the traditional opposition within democracy between its direct/immediate, on the one hand, and its mediated/representative form, on the other." Menga, "The Seduction of Radical Democracy: Deconstructing Hannah Arendt's Political Discourse," 316.

⁵¹⁶ Disch, "How could Hannah Arendt Glorify the American Revolution and Revile the French? Placing *On Revolution* in the Historiography of the French and American Revolutions," 352.

chapter three, I reveal her emphasis on the oppositional nature of the councils in relation to existing governmental structures, a point which has been overlooked by other interpreters.

Arendt strives for – although does not completely attain – an alternative conceptualisation of democracy. She does not adequately articulate a political structure that could replace existing liberal democratic institutions. After examining Arendt's argument in detail, I conclude that she is unable to fully illustrate the institutional details in a manner that would resolve crucial inconsistencies and meet the potential objections of her critics. In particular, her account suffers from a mistaken belief that the administration of economic issues would be undertaken by a non-politicised bureaucracy, leaving the councils freed from the majority of administrative tasks. Arendt's insistence on the non-economic nature of the councils allows her to sidestep important questions of practicality and feasibility that have plagued all arguments for council democracy. In addition, tensions remain in the precise relationship Arendt sought to institute between the higher and lower councils, revealing problems in her attempt to eliminate the exercise of sovereign power within her system. She is also unable to solve the issue of a new form of representation that would avoid the depoliticising effects of current representative institutions. Finally, I analyse claims that Arendt's councils would lead to the establishment of a new political elite. I conclude that she was inattentive to the operation of structural power that would have led to undemocratic exclusions in any potential council democracy. Her inability to answer these crucial questions undermines her sketch of the councils.

Nevertheless, I contend that there is much of importance in Arendt's institutional sketch of a council system. As an intervention into debates over the possibilities and limitations of contemporary democratic institutions, her council system contests the presuppositions of sovereignty and liberalism in democratic institutions. She seeks to rearticulate a concept of democracy that does not adopt the form of "the party system," which she worries "has come to be regarded as synonymous with democracy."⁵¹⁷ She argues for the necessity of processes of "real democratization" to democratic institutions that go beyond the more conservative elements of Madisonian republicanism.⁵¹⁸ Her institutional proposal provides a critical perspective on liberal representative democracy and prompts further experimentation with other alternatives beyond current electoral institutions. It allows for a way out of stale debates

⁵¹⁷ Arendt, "The Impotence of Power," Arendt Papers, 014406.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

between direct and representative democracy and opens new pathways for institutional innovations within democratic theory.

Interpretations of Arendt's Council System

Andreas Kalyvas has provided the most recent examination of Arendt's council system, which he interprets as her attempt at "the institutionalization of the extraordinary" into a federal constitutional system.⁵¹⁹ His emphasis on the radical break Arendt makes with traditional forms of liberal democracy and her conception of a federal constitutional republic draws his interpretation closest to my own. However, there are two main aspects of Kalyvas' reading of Arendt's councils with which I take issue. Firstly, Kalyvas argues that Arendt's radical republicanism can be read as a critical response to the dangers of modern democratic tendencies. I contend that Kalyvas mistakenly separates Arendt's position from its democratic leanings in calling her system a "republic of elementary councils," which he claims she "strongly distinguished from democracy."⁵²⁰ Arendt herself rarely emphasised such a distinction between these two forms of government and often used them interchangeably.⁵²¹ She can certainly be described as a republican, but not in a sense that would separate her fundamentally from a broader project of radical democracy. Arendt's criticisms of democracy are more often directed at procedures of majority rule, the subversion of legality by popular will and the unbounded exercise of power, none of which are strictly equivalent with democracy.⁵²² Many of her critical remarks on democracy are espoused through the writings of the Founding Fathers. As with all of Arendt's appropriations of historical sources, it is rarely clear to what extent Arendt is endorsing their views or maintaining a critical distance. To the extent that Arendt criticised a form of representative democracy, she could still be said to support a different understanding of democratic politics based on the model of a council democracy.

⁵¹⁹ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 254–291, 255.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 272, 264.

⁵²¹ See for example: "I have repeatedly stressed that democracy or republican government is much older than the party system." Arendt, "The Impotence of Power," Arendt Papers, 014405. It has already been argued that Arendt's councils can be traced to the councils of the post-First World War period rather than Jefferson's suggested "elementary republics."

⁵²² On Arendt's critical remarks towards democracy see Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 265–270.

The second issue concerns the place of Arendt's councils within Kalyvas' broader framework of a theory of extraordinary politics. Kalyvas' interpretation of Arendt is based on his own attempt at deriving a "*three-level* model of democratic politics" that depends on the separation of constituent power into three distinct temporal moments.⁵²³ Kalyvas' first moment "refers to the extraordinary, instituting moment of democratic founding, the creation of new symbolic meanings, popular insurgencies, and original constitution making."⁵²⁴ The second "refers to procedural, everyday institutionalized politics," "ordinary politics conducted by pressure groups, political elites, interest aggregation, party officials, and public bureaucrats according to the rules and procedures of an existing legality and with a minimum of democratic participation."⁵²⁵ Once the extraordinary moment of popular mobilisation has been stabilised in a permanent regime it risks "stagnation and juridification" to such an extent that Kalyvas requires a third moment of "semi-extraordinary" politics to keep alive the "active, everyday, physical participation of citizens."⁵²⁶ The problem with such a formulation is that it begins from precisely the split that Arendt aimed to overcome: it starts from a separation of the concepts of "stability and the spirit of the new," which Arendt claims "have become opposites in political thought and terminology."⁵²⁷ The extraordinary moments to which Kalyvas appeals are the three instances of Schmitt's self-instituting sovereign, which he superimposes on to Arendt's political theory as a way of taming Schmitt "for a normative democratic theory with a radical intent."⁵²⁸ Arendt's project, on the other hand, is an attempt to meaningfully combine notions of constituent power and constitutional form within a single regime and democratic model.⁵²⁹ She sought to replicate the achievements of the Athenian *polis* which had been designed "to enable men to do permanently ... what otherwise has been possible only as an extraordinary and infrequent enterprise for which they had to leave their households. ... its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence of everyday life."⁵³⁰ An Arendtian politics is based on a plurality of instances of the extraordinary – the "miraculous" nature of human action – dispersed throughout ordinary life. Her democratic theory seeks to establish the conditions in which ordinary citizens could take significant political action on an everyday basis within a constituted political order. Kalyvas

⁵²³ Ibid., 12.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 12, 163.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 262–263

⁵²⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 215.

⁵²⁸ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 4.

⁵²⁹ See James Muldoon, "Arendt's Revolutionary Constitutionalism: Between Constituent Power and Constitutional Form," *Constellations* (forthcoming).

⁵³⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 197.

risks misrepresenting Arendt's democratic politics due to its subordination within his broader project of an analysis and critique of the constitutional writings of Carl Schmitt.

The second prominent engagement with this aspect of Arendt's work is John Sitton's early interpretation and defence of her council system, first published in 1987.⁵³¹ He sets the parameters of subsequent readings by answering a number of Arendt's critics and sketching an outline of the position of the councils in Arendt's political theory. Since politics for Arendt is an irreplaceable human experience that brings freedom and happiness, the primary role of the councils according to Sitton is to maintain a space for political action. The main principles of the councils for Sitton are those of non-sovereignty, participation in politics and the experience of a plurality of perspectives in the public realm. Sitton is justified in assuming that Arendt's council system is an argument for a council democracy that is within the forms of democratic government. He demonstrates that Arendt's focus on territorial councils and criticisms of workers' councils are the source of her misunderstanding of council democracy. He also indicates that Arendt is critical of the principle of sovereignty and that her council system operates according to a federal model of power. On these basic points, Sitton offers a sound interpretation of Arendt. However, his analysis is very brief and he does not flesh out the implications of Arendt's critique of sovereignty or her federal system in any detail, leaving Arendt's arguments vague and ambiguous. I seek to add to Sitton's analysis by providing a more thorough examination of the intended practical operation of the councils and by revealing the importance of the councils as new democratic power structures in response to the disempowerment of modern democracies. First, however, I turn to Arendt's criticisms of liberal representative institutions that lead to her argument for a council democracy.

Critique of Representative Democracy

Arendt's own institutional arrangements are most intelligible when viewed as a response to the perceived shortcomings of modern representative democracies. Her critique of current democratic regimes gestures towards an outline of her proposed alternative. The primary thrust of her argument is that representative democracy systematically disempowers the vast majority of its citizens and exhibits a natural tendency towards greater levels of centralisation

⁵³¹ Sitton, "Hannah Arendt's Argument for a Council Democracy".

and bureaucracy. Her position contains two elements: a radical democratic critique of the aristocratic function of representative government as it was introduced in the eighteenth century and, secondly, drawing from twentieth century sociology, a critique of the oligarchic structure of modern political parties. In a representative government in which political decision-making is restricted to parliamentary institutions, bureaucratically organised political parties control the mechanisms of government and marginalise citizens. Arendt believes that the issue is so grave that it could be said that “representative government has in fact become oligarchic government,” not in the traditional sense, but certainly to the extent that “what we today call democracy is a form of government where the few rule, at least supposedly, in the interest of the many.”⁵³² I will examine each aspect of her critique in turn.

Firstly, Arendt argues that representative democracy constitutes a partially aristocratic form of government.⁵³³ The most distinguishing feature of representative democracy for Arendt is not the radical break that it makes with monarchical rule, but the continuation with previous systems that legitimise the rulership of the few over the many. For Arendt, representative democracy is the most recent articulation of a political strategy of division and rule. Rather than abolish the age-old distinction between rulers and ruled, the representative institution of elections allows for the permanent inscription of this division based on the purported consent of the people. Arendt often expresses this division through the metaphor of a spatial exclusion – of the people being barred from admission to the public realm. The people in a representative democracy must remain forever *outside of* the public realm, the central mechanisms of which are controlled *from above* by an elite organised within an inaccessible party system. Arendt could well have quoted Madison’s famous distinguishing characteristic of modern republics, which lies in “the total exclusion, of the people in their collective capacity” from government.⁵³⁴ Indeed, Arendt reminds us that the primary theoreticians of representative government, Madison and Sièyes, saw a fundamental difference between democracy understood as self-government or popular rule and the systems they were creating.⁵³⁵ The conservative leanings of the creators of the American Constitution are well

⁵³² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 261.

⁵³³ Cf. Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁵³⁴ Madison, “Federalist 63,” in Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, 38.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

known to historians, even if they have been partially forgotten by some political theorists.⁵³⁶ The writings of a number of the Federalists are pervaded by a distrust of the capacities of ordinary citizens and the dangers of democratic rule. In fact, the Federalists had far less of a claim to be supporting the popular empowerment of American citizens than their opponents, the anti-Federalists, who favoured measures of direct government and greater accountability of representatives.⁵³⁷

While the advent of representative democracy following the French and American revolutions is celebrated as the entrance of ordinary citizens into the political realm, the political reality provides a radically different portrait. A discourse of popular sovereignty and representative institutions actively works against political participation by privileging parliament as the exclusive seat of political power. The government's activity of ruling in the name of a hypothetical "people" takes the place of the people's actual political practices.⁵³⁸ Arendt views the question in terms of "the conflict between the people and a mercilessly centralized power apparatus which, under the pretence of representing the sovereignty of the nation, actually deprived the people of their power."⁵³⁹ Representative democracy, as a specific institutional framework first put into practice in the late eighteenth century, was largely designed to legitimatise a form of elite rule. Regular rotation of those in office fails to alleviate the fact that the majority of citizens are excluded from participation in the daily business of government. Although structured competition between elites generally reduces the chances of the systematic abuse of individuals' private interests, it fails to provide a public space for political participation or grant citizens a significant role in public affairs. Arendt laments that following the American Revolution, "there was no space reserved, no room left for the exercise of precisely those qualities which had been instrumental in building it."⁵⁴⁰

Representative democracy is also criticised because it does not allow for the genuine formation of opinions due to a lack of deliberative spaces for ordinary citizens. This criticism is tied to Arendt's distrust of voting as a political process in the absence of other more meaningful extra-electoral political activities. On its own, voting is an inadequate form of

⁵³⁶ Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–89*; Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010) 28.

⁵³⁷ Disch, "How could Hannah Arendt Glorify the American Revolution and Revile the French? Placing *On Revolution* in the Historiography of the French and American Revolutions".

⁵³⁸ Frank, *Constituent Moments*, 27–28; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 240.

⁵³⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 240.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

political participation because it does not provide a space in which to discuss ideas and test the cogency of different arguments. In response to the standard objection to more direct forms of democracy, that “the room will not hold all,” Arendt argues that current representative institutions are equally inadequate because “the booth in which we deposit our ballots is unquestionably too small, for this booth has room for only one.”⁵⁴¹ Arendt values the educative and transformative qualities of deliberation and goes so far as to say genuine opinion formation cannot exist in their absence. An individual is only able to form an opinion when balanced against a multitude of opinions held by others and in response to challenges to their own position. In the absence of such deliberation, Arendt argues that there can only be “moods” within an electorate that can be registered by polling and statistical surveys, but never genuine opinions. For Arendt, “opinions are formed and tested in a process of exchange of opinion against opinion.”⁵⁴² Citizens require personal experience in public debate that develops their ability to criticise opinions and exercise political judgment. The absence of genuine participatory spaces in representative democracy leads to the retreat of citizens into their private interests and a cycle of cynicism and apathy towards the public institutions that purport to represent them.

Secondly, Arendt traces a number of the essential problems of representative democracy to the development of a party system.⁵⁴³ Representative government was originally created without the presence of political parties, which arose during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴⁴ The object of Arendt’s critique is therefore not simply representative democracy, but a specific form of representative government called “party government” in Anglo-American circles or *Parteiendemokratie* in German.⁵⁴⁵ Arendt’s critique of the function of political parties can be placed within a tradition of sociological literature that originated with Robert Michels’ *Political Parties*.⁵⁴⁶ Most well known for its thesis of the “iron law of

⁵⁴¹ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 189.

⁵⁴² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 219.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁵⁴⁴ Roy Franklin Nichols, *The Invention of the American Political Parties* (Berkeley, California: Macmillan, 1967).

⁵⁴⁵ Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, 195.

⁵⁴⁶ Robert Michels was influential on French sociologist Maurice Duverger, whose most well-known book, *Political Parties*, named after Michels’ work of the same name, is the solitary reference of the sociology of political parties in Arendt’s *On Revolution*. In his analysis of the oligarchical tendencies of modern parties, Duverger explicitly acknowledges his debt to Michels. See Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (London: Methuen, 1954) 134, 169. Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York: Free Press, 1962); On Michels’ broader influence see also Robert MacKenzie, *British Political Parties* (London: William Heinemann, 1955) 16; James Bryce, *Modern Democracies, Vol. II* (London: The Macmillan Co., 1921) 546.

oligarchy,” Michels’ work argues that modern bureaucratic political parties will inevitably become dominated by the leadership and develop into oligarchies. Arendt may not agree with his identification of historical laws, but she shares Michels’ critical stance towards party politics. For Arendt:

What stands between the people and power is the political party “machine.” The parties were originally devised as a means to represent the people and an instrument for electing representatives. Today they represent nobody, not even party members, but only the party bureaucracy. In other words, the people have been left without appropriate institutions for their representation.⁵⁴⁷

Designed to bring the mass of voters closer to the workings of power and into the political community, mass political parties were originally hailed as a positive development for democracy.⁵⁴⁸ In addition to exercising political power, parties are thought to mediate competing interests, educate the public, provide avenues for participation, and open spaces for deliberation and debate.⁵⁴⁹ In sum, the role of political parties is to provide a bridge between government and society. Robert Goodin offers a contemporary defence of the place of political parties. He asserts their importance in articulating political platforms and organising the public around political ideas. This activity is central in Goodin’s account for “ideationally unifying” the public around certain “ratios” or principles so that by voting for a party, citizens can be said to be collectively self-legislating and, in one sense, setting their own laws.⁵⁵⁰

The problem for Arendt is that in practice the parties have failed miserably in this ostensible role and are instead better described as “the very efficient instruments through which the power of the people is curtailed and controlled.”⁵⁵¹ Her thesis is deliberately provocative, since it calls into question the traditional view that political parties are an essential and indispensable aspect of modern democratic government. The current consensus appears to be that parties are not going anywhere and that it is hard to imagine the proper functioning of democracy without them.⁵⁵² Arendt entertains a bolder vision, arguing that “the party system is really relatively very young, and that one should not feel that if we develop different ways

⁵⁴⁷ Arendt, “The Impotence of Power,” Arendt Papers, 014394.

⁵⁴⁸ Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, 194.

⁵⁴⁹ L. Sandy Maisel and Mark D. Brewer, *Parties and Elections in America: The Electoral Process* (6th ed.) (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

⁵⁵⁰ Goodin, *Innovating Democracy: Democratic Theory and Practice After the Deliberative Turn*, 220.

⁵⁵¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 261.

⁵⁵² Elmer Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1942); Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968) 90; Brian Schaffner, *Politics, Parties, and Elections in America* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2012) 6.

of organizing ourselves, and electing our representatives, that that is the end of democracy.”⁵⁵³ Arendt’s central point of contention relates to parties’ oligarchic structure and lack of internal democracy. The major parties of large democracies tend to be, in practice, if not in theory, organised through top-down structures with a tightly controlled system of patronage and apprenticeship to access positions of power.⁵⁵⁴ Policies and positions within the party are organised through factional deals and orchestrated by party heads that deter broader participation from the public. Parties develop their own internal culture and systems of hierarchies and interests, which Arendt describes as their “ambitions and fanaticism ... things which the people at large neither understood nor shared.”⁵⁵⁵ In practice, to stand a reasonable chance of being elected, candidates must belong to one of the major parties and agree to abide by the parties’ political platform and party discipline. Rather than select who they wish to represent them, citizens are given a choice between two (or more) candidates chosen by the party organisations, which suffer from a lack of internal democratic structure. This feature, for Arendt, means that the parties cannot realistically be described as popular organs of the people.

Additionally, Arendt is critical of the fact that parties present their policy platform as a “ready-made formula,” to be executed and carried out rather than opening a space for political action. Many parties provide only limited avenues for genuine participation in policy-making because most major points are organised in advance by party officials. Arendt argues that this leads to “a cleavage between the party experts who ‘knew’ and the mass of the people who were supposed to apply this knowledge.”⁵⁵⁶ The trouble is that this formula “left out of account the average citizen’s capacity to act and to form his own opinion.”⁵⁵⁷ Parties require the support of the people in order to retain their legitimacy, but often there is very little effort put into actually providing people with a space for anything but tokenistic participation. For this reason Arendt argues that a parliament of political parties “remains a body whose approach to the people is from without and from above.”⁵⁵⁸ Today, there is an even greater tendency for parties to organise themselves in this manner than in Arendt’s time. By denying citizens a share in public power, Arendt argues that the parties deprive them of some of the

⁵⁵³ Arendt, “The Impotence of Violence,” Arendt Papers, 014405.

⁵⁵⁴ Seth E. Masket, *No Middle Ground: How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

⁵⁵⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 238–239.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

most essential aspects of a full human life, namely a “share in public happiness” and “experience in political freedom.”⁵⁵⁹

Arendt’s polemic distinguishes between the council system and the party system as two different forms of government resting upon different political principles and modes of organisation. However, the councils have never completely excluded political parties, nor have they developed outside of their influence. Arendt notes that “the remarkable thing about the councils was of course not only that they crossed all party lines, that members of the various parties sat in them together, but that such party membership played no role whatsoever.”⁵⁶⁰ We have seen that although the former statement may be true, the latter is demonstrably false. It is not evident whether Arendt considered it possible to completely eliminate political parties, although she considered it an extremely difficult system to reform.⁵⁶¹ She admits that her analysis is a more accurate description of the continental party system than the United States or, to a lesser extent, Great Britain. She also has a positive image of a wide array of clubs, popular societies, associations and assemblies that operate in different ways from the party system.⁵⁶² In criticising the party system she appears to be referring to a tendency of political parties – when combined with powerful economic interests and bureaucratic forms of organisation – towards corruption and perversion of the public realm. Arendt gives voice to the mistrust and scepticism that pervades most ordinary citizens’ experiences of political parties. What stood first and foremost in Arendt’s mind was that current representative institutions denied ordinary citizens the right to meaningfully participate in government. Her criticisms raise the question of which alternative institutions Arendt had in mind for enabling broader citizen participation and more robust government accountability.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 247.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 255.

⁵⁶¹ Arendt is highly doubtful that a reform of the party system would be possible. “Or if I believed now that real reform, real democratization of the major parties is going to occur. But I do not believe this likely. Indeed it is the party machinery that actually makes the citizenry impotent.” Arendt, “The Impotence of Power,” Arendt Papers, 014406.

⁵⁶² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 232.

Arendt's Institutional Design

In this section, I examine Arendt's proposed institutional design of a council democracy and how such councils would operate in practice. A study of Arendt's writings on the councils would be incomplete without a thorough analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of her own proposal. For Arendt, the council system entails a federal state consisting of a network of councils organised in a pyramidal structure. Grass-roots council members elect delegates to sit on progressively higher councils, which culminate in a central executive council. The councils are open to all and small enough so that every citizen could participate and have a voice in deliberations. Local issues would be decided relatively autonomously by the relevant local council whereas larger matters concerning the entire political community would be deliberated on at a grass-roots level and then decided by delegates at a higher council.

The political structure that Arendt sketches in the final pages of *On Revolution* embodies the political principles that I analysed in chapter three: political freedom, empowerment and federalism. Firstly, Arendt stresses the councils' role as "spaces of freedom," participatory institutions in which every citizen could take part in public affairs.⁵⁶³ The councils were "organs of order as much as organs of action," which preserved their citizens' capacity to deliberate and to act.⁵⁶⁴ Secondly, the emergence of the councils led to a "loss of authority in the powers-that-be" and the development of a "new power structure," organised according to a "radically different concept of power which permeates the whole body politic."⁵⁶⁵ Power is generated through the actions and organisational efforts of citizens and moves from the bottom up rather than emanating down from a central political institution. Thirdly, in opposition to the unitary model of sovereign power embodied in the party system, the councils represented a "federal principle" of the plural organisation of political space.⁵⁶⁶ In Arendt's council system, power and authority would be devolved as much as possible to local councils who would retain their capacity for independent action and decision-making.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, Arendt provides only a brief sketch of her proposed institutional arrangement, which begs many questions as to how she imagined the councils would operate in practice. It could be argued in her defence that it was not her job to articulate

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 256.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 255.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 249, 260.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 259.

a blueprint for others to implement. Such a blueprint would conflict with her stated goal of participatory politics, her criticism of philosopher-legislators, and her acknowledgement of the contingent sphere of political action. However, if she expected her readers to take her proposal seriously it would have been beneficial for Arendt to have considered some of the practical problems of the councils and addressed the many possible objections. Her critics argue that Arendt is only able to maintain her enthusiasm for the councils due to avoiding pragmatic questions of how the councils would actually operate.⁵⁶⁷ To respond to these questions we must explore Arendt's proposal in greater detail. Further analysis requires more clarity as to the structure and function of Arendt's councils. I will consider 1) the types of councils appropriate to Arendt's system, 2) the relationship of the councils to each other, and 3) the primary activities of the councils.

To begin with, there is some ambiguity surrounding what types of councils Arendt considered to be relevant to her council system. On the one hand, she admitted a wide variety of councils including "neighbourhood councils, professional councils, councils within factories, apartment houses and so on. There are, indeed, councils of the most various kinds."⁵⁶⁸ However, she was not equally interested in all types of councils and did not consider her council system to consist of every possible form. For example, in her discussion of the Hungarian Revolution Arendt only discusses the "revolutionary councils" and not the "workers' council," which she considered less relevant to her analysis.⁵⁶⁹ Her support for Jefferson's town hall meeting styled "ward system" and the central position it occupies in her discussion of the council system suggests that Arendt believed councils should be territorially rather than functionally base. It appears that she viewed "the subdivision of the counties into wards" as the most preferred form of council system.⁵⁷⁰ There are points at which Arendt considers workplace divisions of councils such as where she refers to "the elementary councils that sprang up wherever people lived *or worked together*," but she is for the most part highly sceptical of the role of workers' councils.⁵⁷¹ As we have seen in chapter one, Arendt attempted to construct an image of a council system that minimised the economic aspects of the councils and their location in workplaces and barracks. From the available evidence it appears that Arendt favoured the establishment of neighbourhood councils based

⁵⁶⁷ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 237.

⁵⁶⁸ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 190.

⁵⁶⁹ Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," 29.

⁵⁷⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 253. Cf. Kalyvas who argues that they would be functionally and territorially based. Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 276.

⁵⁷¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 270.

on the division of territory and population, leading to larger regional councils and up to a national parliament.

Another major challenge to such a system is determining how the different levels of councils would relate to one another. For example, how would political issues be divided between the councils or joint actions be co-ordinated? There is much that is left vague and confusing in Arendt's model on this point. The first problem concerns Arendt's claim to have reconciled the demands of equality and authority. She contends that councils are equal to one another: both in the sense that no council would possess sovereign power over another and that delegates in one council are "not subject to any pressure either from above or from below."⁵⁷² This is noticeably different from the historical workers' councils in which recallable delegates were directly accountable to their constituents. An absence of pressure from below is essential for Arendt in order to maintain the council members' freedom of political action. Equality in Arendt's model is maintained by an agonistic relationship between the councils, which she claims, would "mutually check and control their powers."⁵⁷³ The political demands of one council would be checked and kept in place through the claims and counter-demands of other councils in the network. Arendt argues that the councils were "bound to discover the divisibility of power" and the necessity of maintaining appropriate checks and balances. However, as the councils undergo the process of "co-ordination and integration through the formation of higher councils of a regional or provincial character" the difficult question of priority between the councils emerges.⁵⁷⁴ Delegates in lower councils have no way of directly participating in important discussions concerning issues broader than their municipality aside from through their representatives. As the council structure develops Arendt admits that it adopts a "pyramidal form," with the most logical conclusion being some form of national council at its apex. Through this stratification an obvious inequality develops between delegates on different levels of the council system. Arendt's suggestion that authority would be generated at each level of the councils does little to explain how the lower and higher councils would maintain their equality; or how, in the absence of other formal constraints, powerful councils would not dominate weaker ones. As Arendt argues that power flows from the bottom up, one would assume that issues such as agenda setting and the determination of new laws and regulations would come from the lower councils and be voted up to the higher

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 188.

⁵⁷⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 259.

ones. But then, who would have the final say on such issues? At some point a decision must be made on matters of importance to the political community as a whole. The most practical solution is that such decisions would be taken by the national council. If this were the case, would the national council have the power to enforce its decision against the lower ones? If so, which appears to be what Arendt has in mind, this begins to appear like the exercise of sovereign power. Much will depend on a number of other factors such as what the councils would actually be doing and the relationship between delegates and their electors, issues which will be considered below. As will be shown, there are a number of practical questions that are left unanswered by Arendt, which places in doubt her claim of reconciling equality and authority.

A third and related question concerns the primary activities of the councils. On this point, Arendt is less elusive than she first appears. In specifying the functions of the councils, Arendt turns to a quote from Jefferson: “It would be tempting to spin out further the potentialities of the councils, but it certainly is wiser to say with Jefferson, ‘Begin them only for a single purpose; they will soon show for what others they are the best instruments.’”⁵⁷⁵ This vague line has frustrated her critics and led to a degree of consternation that there is a lack of clarity as to the councils’ proper purpose.⁵⁷⁶ But for Arendt, the councils’ lack of specific administrative duties enabled them to fulfil their intended role: to act as genuine spaces of freedom, institutions of participation and deliberation over political issues. The councils are the institutional realisation of her theory of political freedom as empowered participation in political institutions. Arendt explains the underlying rationale as follows:

The basic assumption of the ward system, whether Jefferson knew it or not, was that no one could be called happy without his share in public happiness, that no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom, and that no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power.⁵⁷⁷

Arendt was clear on the intended purpose of the councils and their absence of administrative tasks. The councils would deliberate on political matters, engage in decision-making, create new laws and ordinances and constitute an open public realm.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 271.

⁵⁷⁶ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 237–238.

⁵⁷⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 255.

It was only in the form of workers' councils, that the councils attempted to undertake economic tasks such as manage factories. Arendt considered councils that engaged in administrative tasks to be deviating from their true purpose: "the fatal mistake of the councils has always been that they themselves did not distinguish between participation in public affairs and administration or management of things in the public interest."⁵⁷⁸ For Arendt, there could be a strict separation of properly political concerns from the tasks of administration in a modern society. As has been aptly demonstrated in Sitton's analysis of Arendt's council system, this was based on her mistaken belief that it would soon be possible for modern technology to handle "all economic matters on technical and scientific grounds, outside of all political considerations."⁵⁷⁹ For her, advances in technology would provide society with a greater capacity to organise the economic sphere more efficiently. Arendt assumed that technical questions could be put outside of the sphere of politics and decided in an objective manner by professional administrators.

As we have seen in chapter one, Arendt's inability to grasp the political dimension of economic activities weakened her institutional writings on the councils. On the one hand, it led her to ignore the activities of workers' councils, which were the main historical form of councils in the modern period. Arendt's claim that attempts at factory management were intended to "drive their members away from the political realm back into the factories" entirely misunderstands the political concerns of the workers. For the councils, the democratisation of the factory was an eminently political demand that complemented their other goals such as democratically organised political institutions.⁵⁸⁰ As a result of this confusion, Arendt's councils are open to the criticism of presenting a hollow and overly-idealised view of political action. If the councils would not be discussing issues of health, education, housing and other socio-economic concerns, it is unclear what they would be doing and whether they would serve any useful function as political institutions. On the other hand, her separation of the economic and the political spheres prevented her from conceptualising the councils' attempt at bringing the economic sphere under political control and subjecting the unfettered rule of economic elites to democratic forms of accountability. Such endeavours could only appear as misguided and counterproductive from Arendt's standpoint of the implicit separation of the political and the economic. However, by presupposing their

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 266.

⁵⁷⁹ Hannah Arendt, "The Cold War and the West," in Edith Kurzweil (ed.), *A Partisan Century: Political Writings from Partisan Review* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 206.

⁵⁸⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 266.

partition, Arendt misunderstands one of the essential functions of the councils to re-organise the underlying structural conditions of workers' lives.

In his analysis of Arendt's councils, Sitton briefly points to her reliance on a principle of nonsovereign politics and her interest in a federal system. However, Sitton does not expand on what is implied by Arendt's critique of sovereignty or support for a federal model of political power. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Arendt's critique of sovereignty advocates a more plural organisation of political power and that it does so against unifying forms of political logic. She attempts to cultivate a more active conception of political subjects in democratic regimes through the creation of new institutional spaces for political action. Power structures would be decentralised to intermediate and local constituent bodies, which would enable increased political action at a grass-roots level. In this chapter, I exhibit how this analysis of federalism and empowerment dovetails with Arendt's institutional aspirations to foster a different structure of political power.

For Arendt, the councils organised power according to a diametrically opposed model to traditional governments. Arendt depicts the new organisational structure of the councils through two different images of power: one that flows horizontally across councils and another that moves from bottom to top.⁵⁸¹ Most governments are organised by a centralised apparatus that controls key decisions and feeds power down to subordinate institutions and personnel. This is the model of the centralised sovereign state, which was retained in the democratic sovereign model of Rousseau and the French Revolution. The authority to act in the name of the government is conferred upon agents by the sovereign, with power emanating from above and moving down the structure. In contrast, the councils organise power from the bottom up. The institutional structure of the council system retains genuine power at the lowest levels of decision-making where it is closest to the people. There is no hypothetical social contract in the form of a renouncing or conferring of power to a sovereign in exchange for peace, security or property rights. Power arises in the people through joint political action and is not monopolised by a hierarchical institution in order to maintain a system of rulership. The councils, for Arendt, are "something which builds itself up from the grass roots, so that you really can say *potestas in populo*, that is, that power comes from below and not from

⁵⁸¹ For a discussion of these differences see Yannis Papadopolous, "A Framework for Analysis of Functions and Dysfunctions of Direct Democracy: Top-Down and Bottom-Up Perspectives," *Politics and Society* (1995) 23, 421–448.

above.”⁵⁸² She contrasts the council system to the “mercilessly centralized power apparatus” of the sovereign state, for whom the power of the people is a useful fiction that confers legitimacy and authority on the central government via democratic elections.⁵⁸³

One aspect of Arendt’s councils that has failed to receive sufficient attention is their role as oppositional sources of alternative power within a political regime. This is evident in her description of them as the “amazing formation of a new power structure which owed its existence to nothing by the organizational impulses of the people themselves.”⁵⁸⁴ Arendt emphasises that the councils were able to produce new forms of political power through eliciting the political energies of citizens. The generation of new forms of power through political action is able to transform stagnant political institutions and rejuvenate the political processes. In Arendt’s account, as citizens began to create power, the councils challenged the legitimacy and authority of existing institutions and began to act as “competitors for public power”.⁵⁸⁵ She views the council system as arising alongside the remnants of state institutions as a new structure of power that challenged existing institutions, a “counterpower.”⁵⁸⁶ In certain respects, her theory anticipates contemporary ideas of the construction of alternative institutions within a regime, developing alongside existing structures in order to eventually replace them. In these currents of revolutionary discourse, counterpower designates popular institutions that are challengers to traditional state power.⁵⁸⁷ David Graeber describes it as “a collection of social institutions set in opposition to the state and capital: from self-governing communities to radical labor unions to popular militias.”⁵⁸⁸ Their goal is to undermine and delegitimise the power of the old elites and simultaneously build alternative models that could replace them. While Arendt would not concur with all aspects of contemporary articulations of counterpower, for both Arendt and contemporary writers, councils seek to transform the institutions of the state into more open and democratic council institutions. Arendt’s institutional design emphasises the oppositional and insurgent nature of the councils as alternative structures of political power.

⁵⁸² Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 327.

⁵⁸³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 236.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁸⁶ Although this idea is only hinted at by Arendt, in a discussion on Montesquieu she claims that “power can only be checked by counterpower.” Arendt, “The Impotence of Power,” Arendt Papers, 014401. See also Arendt, *On Revolution*, 248.

⁵⁸⁷ Tim Gee, *Counterpower: Making Change Happen* (London: New Internationalist, 2011).

⁵⁸⁸ David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004) 24.

Problems of Scale and Complexity

A number of criticisms have arisen concerning the proposed structure of Arendt's council system. The main problem encountered by any model of radical or participatory democracy is the charge of irrelevance in the face of large-scale, heterogeneous and technically complex societies.⁵⁸⁹ In other words, the councils may simply be an unfeasible response to current organisational requirements. For example, Jürgen Habermas is troubled by what he sees as the "anti-institutionalism" inherent in council democracy. He argues that conceiving of society on the basis of horizontal networks of voluntary associations "was always utopian; today it is still less workable, given the regulatory and organisational needs of modern societies."⁵⁹⁰ This argument is most commonly deployed against forms of direct democracy based on the Athenian model or anarchist ideals of a stateless and lawless society.⁵⁹¹ However, Arendt's proposal is less susceptible to the criticism of anti-institutional bias than classical anarchist models due to its strong conception of the rule of law, separation of powers and stable institutions. Central to Arendt's idea of the councils is a federal model with a system of co-ordination between councils. Power and authority would be gradated throughout the system to ensure a division of power between the councils and a system of checks and balances that she so admired in the American Constitution. Therefore, we must consider whether Arendt's council system, with its federal structure, rule of law and balancing of powers, is susceptible to similar criticisms of an inability to deal with problems of scale and complexity.

Firstly, there is the problem of how to scale up face-to-face meetings of individual councils to create a broader functional system. Meetings of small groups of citizens may be able to resolve local problems but how would the citizens of an entire state manage to personally engage with one another in discussing political concerns. Arendt recognises this to be a

⁵⁸⁹ Mark Warren, "What Should We Expect from More Democracy? Radically Democratic Responses to Politics," *Political Theory* (1996) 24 (2), 241–270; Emily Hauptmann, "Can Less Be More? Leftist Deliberative Democrats' Critique of Participatory Democracy," *Polity* (2001) 33 (3), 397–421. Smaller versions of council-like systems can be found in both the New England town hall meetings and in the new framework of participatory budgeting in parts of Latin America. See Joseph F. Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action* (Westport: Praeger, 1999); Frank M. Bryan, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How it Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Archon Fung, "Reinventing Democracy in Latin America," *Perspectives on Politics* (2011) 9 (4), 857–871.

⁵⁹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) 481.

⁵⁹¹ See Gerald A. Cohen and Charles Sabel "Direct Deliberative Polyarchy," *European Law Journal* (1997) 3 (4), 313–342.

problem for attempts at rehabilitating direct forms of democracy: “The Greeks . . . were quite aware of the fact that the polis, with its emphasis on action and speech, could survive only if the number of citizens remained restricted.”⁵⁹² But Arendt’s council system is not a simple direct democracy because it relies on the election of representatives to higher council levels. I will further discuss the nature of representation in Arendt’s system below. But for now, it is enough to note that it is precisely this federal model that is her answer to the problem of scale. As has been demonstrated, the federal structure enables direct participation of citizens on certain issues while still permitting representatives to be selected to constitute higher councils in a pyramidal structure. She considered this federal system appropriate for all levels of politics: from the smallest local councils up to international alliances between federal council states.⁵⁹³ There are still a number of questions of how such a federal system would practically be organised, but this is not to say that it would be impossible to develop. The participatory budgeting councils of Porto Alegre and other Brazilian cities present one prominent recent historical example of a political system in which a large-scale participatory model has dealt reasonably well with the negotiation of competing interests across different levels of councils.⁵⁹⁴ There is no evidence to suggest that a federal model of gradated authority as Arendt describes would be completely impractical if the political will existed to implement it. As Benjamin Barber conceives it, the problem of scale is elastic rather than absolute insofar as it is susceptible to technological and organisational amelioration.⁵⁹⁵ One of the basic hurdles has been the problem of communication across large distances, which advances in communications technology have now rendered far less problematic. The traditional scepticism and pessimism of critics is now challenged by a small but growing body of evidence documenting experiments in large-scale participatory politics.⁵⁹⁶

A second problem with the council system is that it appears to offer a far less efficient means of governance. It requires a lengthy process of deliberation on issues in local councils in order for decisions to be made. This could result in an inordinate amount of time being spent on

⁵⁹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 43.

⁵⁹³ In “To Save the Jewish Homeland,” Arendt considered that “a federated state, finally, could be the natural stepping-stone for any later, greater federated structure in the Near East and the Mediterranean area.” Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 400.

⁵⁹⁴ Rebecca Abers, *Inventing Local Democracy: Grassroots Politics in Brazil* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000); Baiocchi, Heller, and Silva, *Bootstrapping Democracy: Transforming Local Governance and Civil Society in Brazil*.

⁵⁹⁵ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984) 248.

⁵⁹⁶ Graham Smith, *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 14–20.

deliberation, which may come at the expense of the attainment of policy objectives. Furthermore, it demands high levels of participation from citizens, which some critics believe to be unrealistic in our highly disengaged and apathetic societies.⁵⁹⁷ The levels of time and energy required of a council system may simply be too demanding for contemporary societies. To the first issue, Arendt could reply that a council system might incorporate special emergency powers for making time-sensitive decisions, which would then need to be justified to the councils after the fact to explain why such emergency measures were necessary. With regards to the efficiency of the council system, every political system must strike a balance between the administrative demands that are placed on citizens and government and the democratic values of transparency, equality and legitimacy. All democratic governments must tackle questions of an “economy of time” when designing institutions for greater civic participation.⁵⁹⁸ The normative argument in favour of more participation is that some additional burdens on public authorities and institutions are necessary and justifiable when considering the positive democratic goods that result from increased participation and greater popular control over decision-making.⁵⁹⁹ It is not possible at a general level to determine the precise point at which increased time requirements would become too onerous for participatory institutions. This would have to be determined pragmatically by actors involved in the process. Weighing up the perceived costs alongside the benefits of participation would be a central consideration of any new institutional design.

A third potential issue is that the problems faced by contemporary politics are too complex and sophisticated to be dealt with by ordinary citizens working within a council system. Ever since Plato’s seafaring metaphor, advocates of “guardianship” models of political society have emphasised the necessity of appropriate levels of expertise in governance.⁶⁰⁰ The contemporary version of Plato’s argument is reflected in technocratic visions of society. The complexity of modern governance problems has increased in our time due to the further differentiation and development of society into a number of semi-autonomous subsystems. Our society appears more sophisticated than ever before, placing in doubt whether a council organisation could cope with the levels of administrative and political complexity.⁶⁰¹ In

⁵⁹⁷ Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1987) 278–297.

⁵⁹⁸ David Beetham, *Democracy and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999) 8–9.

⁵⁹⁹ Smith, *Democratic Innovations*, 18.

⁶⁰⁰ Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) 76.

⁶⁰¹ Niklas Luhmann, *Political Theory in the Welfare State* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990); Danilo Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity: A Realist Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

response to this problem it can be argued that there is no discernible reason why a representative democracy would be more equipped to cope with greater levels of technically complex information than Arendt's council democracy. Both systems have access to expert knowledge to assist in political decisions and both are expected to make information accessible to the public in order to inform broader public debate. An argument against council democracy on this point would appear to be equally directed against all forms of democratic government, which few today would be willing to support.

Representation in the Councils

Another issue for Arendt's council system concerns its form of political representation. Arendt is well known as a steadfast critic of representation and an advocate of more direct and immediate forms of political participation. Indeed, there is a general scepticism towards representation and a participatory streak that runs throughout her writings. As has been demonstrated in her critique of representative government, she believes that forms of virtual representation can be disempowering because they exclude the represented from the direct exercise of public power. Citizens who are merely represented are "not admitted to the public realm" and are not able to exercise their "virtuous dispositions" in political action.⁶⁰² By leaving political affairs to elected representatives, citizens allow themselves to be disenfranchised and relegated to the margins of political life. Political representation is bound to be a difficult issue for Arendt's political theory for the simple fact that it places a high importance on the direct speech and action of individuals as an integral part of the political process.⁶⁰³ Participation in politics is for Arendt an irreplaceable form of experience that provides both happiness and freedom. Its abdication constitutes an assault "on the very dignity of the political realm itself."⁶⁰⁴ By this Arendt means politics is a particular sphere of life that enables a certain form of human activity that cannot be undertaken outside of this realm. In political action, citizens appear amongst their peers and are seen and heard in the public realm. For these reasons, many of her critics have taken Arendt to be unequivocally opposed to all forms of political representation.⁶⁰⁵ There are good grounds to support this

⁶⁰² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 229.

⁶⁰³ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 273.

⁶⁰⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 24, 228.

⁶⁰⁵ George Kateb, "Arendt and Representative Democracy," in Garrath Williams (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers, Vol. 2* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 106; Lefort, *Democracy*

position. Even in her institutional analysis, she tends to frame the question in oppositional terms: “the issue at stake was representation versus action and participation. The councils were organs of action, the revolutionary parties were organs of representation.”⁶⁰⁶ However, this simplicity belies a greater level of nuance in Arendt’s writings on the topic of representation.

As Andreas Kalyvas and Lisa Disch have demonstrated, although Arendt is critical of current incarnations of representative government and the party system, she is not opposed to the concept of political representation *per se*.⁶⁰⁷ Arendt is not advocating a simple system of direct democracy – either in its ancient Athenian or modern Swiss variants.⁶⁰⁸ She is interested in *alternative* forms of representation and institutional innovations rather than a complete rejection of representation on Rousseauian grounds. In fact, she criticises Rousseau’s disciples in the French Revolution who claimed that representation was impossible.⁶⁰⁹ Arendt claims that the council system is “the only alternative of democratic electoral representation to the one presented by the Continental multi-party system.”⁶¹⁰ It enables “different ways of organizing ourselves, *and electing our representatives*.”⁶¹¹ Arendt’s council system seeks a new enactment of political representation that would avoid the depoliticising effects of current representative systems and the impracticalities of direct democracy. The gradated system of councils for which Arendt advocates attempts to enable citizens to participate in certain forms of deliberation and decision-making *and* have their views represented at higher councils in the case of broader issues. It seeks to provide multiple points of participation that offer citizens opportunities to contribute without subjecting every political decision to a direct plebiscitary vote. Cautious of traditional theories of representation, Arendt attempts to overcome the deficiencies of both direct and existing representative forms of democratic government. However, although Arendt sheds light on

and Political Theory, 55; Albrecht Wellmer, “Arendt on Revolution,” in Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 232.

⁶⁰⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 273.

⁶⁰⁷ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 282; Disch, “How could Hannah Arendt Glorify the American Revolution and Revile the French? Placing On Revolution in the Historiography of the French and American Revolutions,” 352.

⁶⁰⁸ Thus I argue that Ferdinando G. Menga is mistaken when he argues that Arendt maintains a “paradigmatic primacy of direct democracy” in Menga, “The Seduction of Radical Democracy: Deconstructing Hannah Arendt’s Political Discourse,” 317. Secondly, Arendt opposes a Swiss system of federalism based on “small self-administrative bodies of communes and cantons” which she sees as a peculiar exception and “not a model that could be imitated.” Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 273.

⁶⁰⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 233.

⁶¹⁰ Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” 29–30.

⁶¹¹ Arendt, “The Impotence of Power,” Arendt Papers, 014405 (my emphasis).

many of the weaknesses of current representative institutions, I argue that she is unable to formulate a compelling political alternative.

Throughout her analysis in *On Revolution*, Arendt vacillates between two alternative conceptions of representation: mandate and independence, both of which she ultimately rejects.⁶¹² Yet her compromise position, based on the principles of personal trust and integrity, is highly unrealistic and ill-equipped to fully account for the complexities of a plausible concept of representation in contemporary society.⁶¹³ Arendt conceives of the mandate/independence debate as a tension between two equally undesirable concepts of representation: either the people elect representatives who are authorised to act on the basis of their own judgment, independent of their constituents, or, the representatives are mere delegates, compelled to act precisely as their constituents would in their position. In the latter case, Arendt believes that no genuinely political space could emerge for deliberation and decision-making, because representatives would be reduced to mere messengers of their constituents. In the former case, where representatives form opinions and judgments in the course of governing, their constituents surrender all power to them and politics once again becomes a privilege of the few. Arendt considered this second alternative closer to the realities of the modern age, but maintained a critical stance towards both perspectives.

Turning now to Arendt's position, the federal council system is structured such that representatives are elected by council members to sit on progressively higher levels of the pyramid. The first level of the councils is constituted through a process of self-selection. Arendt explains that the bottom layer would be composed of people "who selected themselves," in other words, "those who cared and those who took the initiative."⁶¹⁴ I will return later to the problems of elitism and inclusivity relating to this procedure. But for now, let us note that all citizens have the right to participate in the councils. These citizens then "chose their deputies for the next higher council, and these deputies, again, were selected by their peers, they were not subject to any pressure either from above or from below."⁶¹⁵ Importantly, deputies are chosen by other citizens within their council rather than being "proposed" to the electorate by a party apparatus following a pre-selection process. This small

⁶¹² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 228–229. For further discussion see Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1967) 144–167.

⁶¹³ See Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution".

⁶¹⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 270.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 270.

difference is crucial for Arendt because the council system is designed to break the stranglehold of the oligarchic political parties over the political process and open it up to a broader section of society.⁶¹⁶

Arendt proposes a distinctive way in which representatives would be chosen. Her concept of representation in the councils begins from the simple scenario of a small group conversation. Arendt argues, “if only ten of us are sitting around a table, each expressing his opinion, each hearing the opinions of others, then a rational formation of opinion can take place through the exchange of opinions.”⁶¹⁷ For Arendt, genuine opinion formation can only occur within a deliberative environment in which individuals can discuss political issues and compare their views with the perspectives of others. For this aspect of her theory, Arendt draws from the Federalists’ vision of representation as permitting the purification and refinement of opinion. Although critical of Madison on other points, she appreciates the unique role of the US Senate in opinion formation and the way in which it was designed to act as a “medium through which all public views must pass.”⁶¹⁸ From this metaphor, it becomes clear that Arendt understands it is opinions that will be the object of representation, rather than interests or persons.⁶¹⁹ The opinion formed within this deliberative setting would be represented at the next level of councils by what Arendt names a “delegate” or “deputy.” Arendt uses the term delegate rather than “representative,” but without a corresponding theory of delegation.⁶²⁰ Arendt explicitly rejects the typical socialist model of strictly binding mandates and directly recallable delegates that is associated with the historical councils. The distinctive aspect of Arendt’s system relates to how such delegates would be selected. For Arendt, it would be “according to political criteria, for their trustworthiness, their personal integrity, their capacity of judgement, often for their physical courage.”⁶²¹ But above all, deputies are selected on the

⁶¹⁶ On this point, empirical evidence indicates that social proximity between constituent and deputy can lead to less elitist tendencies within a representative system. Marion Gret and Yves Sintomer, *The Porto Alegre Experiment: Learning Lessons for Better Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2005) 94–95.

⁶¹⁷ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 190.

⁶¹⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 219; Madison, “Federalist 10,” *The Federalist Papers*, 59; Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 282; See also James R. Martel, “The Ambivalent Anarchism of Hannah Arendt,” in Jimmy Casas Klausen and James R. Martel (eds.), *How Not to be Governed: Readings and Interpretations from a Critical Anarchist Left* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011) 149.

⁶¹⁹ This can be compared with the suggestion from John Dryzek and Simon Niemayer that discourses should be the object of representation. By discourses, they mean “a set of categories and concepts embodying specific assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions, and capabilities.” John Dryzek and Simon Niemayer, “Discursive Representation,” *American Political Science Review* (2008) 102 (4), 481–493.

⁶²⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 259, 270.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

basis of “personal trust” and the “confidence” of their peers.⁶²² This model of representation as the realisation of a bond of trust is based on a form of politics that Arendt locates in the Hungarian Revolution. She observed that during the formation of councils, the choice of the voter was made “exclusively by his estimation of a man” and was “not bound by anything except trust in his personal qualities.”⁶²³ Arendt does not clarify what she calls “the principle of personal trust,” but leaves it to her readers to imagine the potentialities of such a system.⁶²⁴ The only guidance she offers is that the delegate most suited to representing the opinion that emerges within deliberations is the individual who is able to gain the trust and confidence of other council members.

I contend that there is a fundamental limitation with this approach due to its conception of representation as an individual relationship rather than a function of a political system. In her own conception of representation, Arendt turns away from her previous systematic analysis of the overall effects of a system of representation to conceive of it in individualistic terms as a direct relationship between constituents and a delegate. This fails to account for the broader role of political representation, which Hanna Pitkin usefully summarises as “primarily a public, institutionalized arrangement involving many people and groups, and operating in the complex ways of large-scale social arrangements.”⁶²⁵ Rather than analyse a direct constituent-representative relationship, for Pitkin, “what makes it representation is not any single action by any one participant, but the over-all structure and functioning of the system, the patterns emerging from the multiple activities of many people.”⁶²⁶ While Arendt’s systematic critique of representative democracy provides a critical angle on its disempowering effects, her own proposal appears naïve and underdeveloped in the face of the complexities of modern governance institutions. One key problem of Arendt’s theory is her idea that representatives would not feel pressure from above or below, which neglects the existence of bargaining, strategic negotiation and trade-offs in politics. Whether or not Arendt approves of such activities, they are realities of political life that are unlikely to disappear within a different institutional form. The problem of representation, which Arendt saw as “one of the crucial and most troublesome issues of modern politics,” proved to be a stumbling block that she was

⁶²² Ibid., 271.

⁶²³ Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” 30.

⁶²⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 271.

⁶²⁵ Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, 221.

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 221–222.

unable to adequately overcome.⁶²⁷ That Arendt could not conjure an adequate explanation of the issue of representation should come as no surprise, since she admitted that it “constituted one of those dilemmas which permit of no solution.”⁶²⁸ While more promising explorations of the concept of political representation have been written in recent years, the implausible role of representatives in her council system undermines the institutional feasibility of her position.⁶²⁹ Arendt’s criticisms of existing representative institutions reveal the fundamentally disempowering effects of current systems, but the weaknesses of her own account show that more work is needed, both theoretically and practically, in developing viable political alternatives.

Arendt’s Elites

One of the major criticisms of Arendt’s writings on the councils is that her proposition to replace modern representative government with a participatory council system would lead to the creation of a new well-resourced elite. Arendt’s declaration of the “end of general suffrage as we understand it today” is enough to strike fear in the hearts of modern liberal democrats, but it does not need to have such elitist overtones as her critics suggest. I contend that the charge of elitism is partially refuted by the intention of Arendt’s argument, which forces us to put into context her final provocative statement regarding the creation of a new “aristocratic” elite. Arendt’s council system is better interpreted as an extension rather than a limitation of political rights and participation. Her main thesis in *On Revolution* is that representative democracy denies people genuine political freedom and self-rule and puts in its place a “government of the people by an élite sprung from the people.”⁶³⁰ For Arendt, voting for rulers in periodic elections from a professional class of party politicians is entirely missing the point of politics. “For political freedom, generally speaking, means the right ‘to be a participator in government’, or it means nothing.”⁶³¹ Politics is not concerned with “ruling” but rather the creation of a public space between plural human beings where they may act in

⁶²⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 228.

⁶²⁸ Ibid., 229.

⁶²⁹ For more recent approaches to the concept of representation see Jane Mansbridge, “Rethinking Representation,” *American Political Science Review* (2003) 97 (4), 515–528; Michael Saward, “Representation and Democracy: Revisions and Possibilities,” *Sociology Compass* (2008) 2 (3), 1000–1013; Lisa Disch, “Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation,” *American Political Science Review* (2011) 105 (1), 100–114.

⁶³⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 269.

⁶³¹ Ibid., 210.

concert. Despite contrary interpretations, Arendt does not wish to further limit democratic participation to a privileged few but extend the opportunity of direct participation in government to every citizen.

A possible concern with the transformation of state institutions is that it would threaten individual civil liberties enshrined in law. However, there is no indication that Arendt intended to remove existing liberties through the implementation of the council system. Fears of a council dictatorship that would run roughshod over civil rights are not warranted in the case of Arendt's constitutional council system. She valued the civil liberties provided by stable institutions and the rule of law and showed no sign of advocating for their abolition. On the contrary, the councils would further embed and extend existing freedoms. While certain models of a council republic entail the elimination of a separation of powers and the removal of judicial controls over democratic decisions, Arendt did not prescribe the absolute rule of a democratic majority outside of all boundaries of positive law. Arendt's council system proposed a clear separation of powers, an independent judiciary as a neutral arbiter of the law and constitutional liberties for citizens.

However, Margaret Canovan believes her reading of an elitist strand in Arendt's work is supported by Arendt's "distrust of the mass of ordinary voters" evidenced in her previous works, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*.⁶³² A key theme in Canovan's reinterpretation of Arendt is that Arendt's political thought developed from her reflections on totalitarianism.⁶³³ Canovan asserts that as a Jew who witnessed the rise of Hitler, Arendt carried with her a distrust of "the masses" that taints her work.⁶³⁴ While it is difficult to deny a suspicious tone in Arendt's earlier work, there are a number of passages in *On Revolution* that praise the capacities of ordinary citizens and appear to offer an alternative perspective on democratic politics. Arendt refers to the "political maturity" of the working class who are "entirely capable of acting in a political capacity."⁶³⁵ She mourns the loss of the "the townships and the town-hall meetings, the original springs of all political activity"⁶³⁶ attended by "the many" in American society, alongside the suppression of the popular societies by Robespierre during the French Revolution.

⁶³² Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, 236.

⁶³³ Ibid., 7.

⁶³⁴ Canovan, "The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought," 7.

⁶³⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 266.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 231.

Jeffery Isaac believes that this misunderstanding of Arendt's work is due to her use of the term "the masses" as a sociological category to designate the type of person produced by a mass society: the anonymous individuated consumer who votes according to private interests and participates infrequently in public affairs. But Isaac stresses "'the masses' is not a psychological category intended to denigrate the capacities of ordinary men and women."⁶³⁷ Arendt herself notes the dangers in the simple "equation of 'people' and masses,"⁶³⁸ highlighting the clear distinction in her mind. Whereas a member of the masses is conformist and is controlled by mainstream media and "Madison Avenue" politics, Arendt urges ordinary citizens to break out of this cycle by forming citizens' councils and creating a public space in which to act. It is only through "breaking up 'the many' into assemblies where one could count and be counted upon" that the perversions of mass society could be remedied.⁶³⁹ And indeed, her pessimism should not be overstated for this is qualified by her position that "political passions ... are perhaps not as rare as we are inclined to think, living in a society which has perverted all virtues into social values."⁶⁴⁰ Furthermore, the lofty ideals which Arendt sets for her citizens as someone who "strives for excellence regardless not only of social status and administrative office but even of achievement and congratulations" demonstrates that we should not be too disheartened to find that Arendt's citizens are "certainly out of the ordinary under all circumstances."⁶⁴¹

However, there are also a number of troubling statements in Arendt's work regarding the limitations of freedom and the role of elites that seem to support some of the more elitist interpretations of her work. Firstly, let us consider Arendt's claim that freedom is spatially limited and that the political spaces of freedom are like "islands in a sea or oases in a desert."⁶⁴² It could be argued that this does not imply that certain categories of people must be excluded, nor does it entail the separation of a political aristocracy from the masses. This line could be read as inferring that equality among humans is a political construction rather than a self-evident natural fact. Arendt's vivid metaphor of an island in a sea echoes the description of classical republicans such as Machiavelli and Rousseau for whom the city-state had to be defended against the inevitable decay of corruption and war. Indeed, it is true that throughout

⁶³⁷ Isaac, "Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics," 162.

⁶³⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 262.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*, 267.

history, republics of the kind Arendt admired have seldom come into existence. There is no logical inconsistency with modern democratic societies creating similar spaces of public freedom on a larger scale.

Yet, if it will only be “those few from all walks of life who have a taste for public freedom and cannot be ‘happy’ without it” participating in government, how will Arendt’s council system fight against democratic exclusions?⁶⁴³ Isaac chastises Canovan for supposing that Arendt’s council system restricted politics to an “aristocratic leisure class” as he believed “[Arendt’s] ‘aristocracy’ is an aristocracy of civic-mindedness, not a hereditary elite based on access to wealth.”⁶⁴⁴ However, it seems legitimate to ask who exactly are these “happy few” and what structures of power would manifest themselves in this new system to exclude certain types of people from participation. Canovan is rightly concerned for those who are “too old, too ill, overburdened with work, or too inarticulate” to participate.⁶⁴⁵ In principle, Arendt’s council system would have no institutional barriers to prevent citizens from participating. Yet Arendt displays no consideration for how traditional power differentials would manifest themselves in her council system.⁶⁴⁶ Studies of political participation reveal a strong correlation between advantages in income, wealth and education and higher levels of participation in politics.⁶⁴⁷ This tendency increases the more intensive and demanding the form of participation.⁶⁴⁸ There is therefore a danger that the councils would reinforce and intensify existing power differentials in society.⁶⁴⁹ Arendt appears either oblivious or indifferent to such consequences, since she includes no discussion of how the institutional design of the councils would guard against these imbalances thwarting her egalitarian commitments. More recent writings in participatory democracy have identified ways in which institutions can be designed that partially overcome the overrepresentation of economically advantaged participants and that can even reverse the bias that has traditionally been found in

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 271.

⁶⁴⁴ Isaac, “Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics,” 160.

⁶⁴⁵ Canovan, “The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt’s Political Thought,” 19.

⁶⁴⁶ Deranty and Renault, “Democratic Agon: Striving for Distinction or Struggle against Domination and Injustice?” in Schaap (ed.), *Law and Agonistic Politics*, 44.

⁶⁴⁷ Sidney Verba, Norman H. Nie and Jae-On Kim, *Participation and Political Equality* (Cambridge University Press, 1978); Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶⁴⁸ Arend Lijphart, “Unequal Participation: Democracy’s Unresolved Dilemma,” *American Political Science Review* (1997) 91 (1), 1–14.

⁶⁴⁹ Anne Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

participatory institutions.⁶⁵⁰ However, these concerns are not addressed by Arendt in her theory of representation or seen as a weakness of the council form that would need to be overcome. This inattentiveness to the political dynamics of struggles for power raises serious questions over the potential unjust and undemocratic exclusion of citizens in Arendt's council system.

The Desirability of Arendt's Council System

In this chapter, I have raised a number of problems concerning Arendt's institutional proposal. Considered together, these contradictions and inconsistencies present a sizeable obstacle to the direct implementation of Arendt's council system. The most pressing concern is Arendt's belief that the councils would not undertake economic tasks or deliberate on administrative issues. I have argued that such a division would be impossible to maintain in practice and if it were attempted it would lead to the irrelevance of the councils for the many political concerns that also contain deep social and economic dimensions. Furthermore, it is not clear which form of representation would be possible or desirable in an Arendtian council system. Arendt is clearly against the typical socialist model of mandated and directly recallable delegates, but her own proposal based on a principle of personal trust in which the representatives would not be pressured by their electors is an unrealistic and unviable alternative. There are other criticisms against which Arendt would have a more convincing reply such as problems of scale and elitist tendencies in the system, but even here it is not clear that Arendt's proposal presents a more desirable embodiment of democratic principles than that which could be established by reforms to current liberal representative institutions. Ultimately, it is difficult to conceive of a functioning model of anything like Arendt describes in the final pages of *On Revolution*.

Nevertheless, Arendt's design of a council system is important for two reasons. Firstly, the councils are central to her vision of a renewal of political action and the public realm in the modern world. To completely discount her writings on the councils as an anomaly in her work would be to fail to see the ways in which they embodied many of her central political values

⁶⁵⁰ Gianpaolo Baiocchi, *Militants and Citizens: The Politics of Participatory Democracy in Porto Alegre* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Patrick Heller and Thomas Isaac, "Democracy and Development: Decentralized Planning in Kerala," in Archon Fung and Erik O. Wright (eds.), *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Democracy* (London: Verso, 2003).

in an institutional form. In particular, the role the council system plays in the articulation of her central political ideas shows to what extent her political thought is misrepresented when considered as an institutionally unanchored account of political action or an exercise in Grecophilic nostalgia. Secondly, Arendt's council system retains a pressing relevance for political theory because it provides a robust and prescient criticism of liberal representative democracy and presents an alternative set of political principles that could guide its reform. In this respect, we can see the councils as an historical example in the sense developed in the introduction and chapters two and three of this thesis. Arendt's return to forms of council democracy is based on her retrieval of forgotten political principles that disrupt modern narratives and open up a broader horizon of political ideas.⁶⁵¹ The idea of a council system redirects our political imagination by offering an alternative political vision to guide our interrogation of democratic questions. Although we have reason to doubt the attractiveness and feasibility of a full-scale council model, Arendt's writings on the councils prompt active experimentation with institutional alternatives to liberal representative democratic regimes.

⁶⁵¹ Miller, "The Pathos of Novelty: Hannah Arendt's Image of Freedom in the Modern World," in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*.

Chapter 5: Council Democracy Revisited

Despite widespread criticisms of current liberal minimalist forms of democracy, the democratic councils of the immediate post-First World War period have not captured the imagination of mainstream political thought. Council democracy has generally been disregarded as an unfeasible and utopian political project. In contrast, democratic theory has tended to draw inspiration from other more prominent historical eras such as ancient Athens, the Roman Republic, the French and American Revolutions and the civil rights and student movements. One reason for this lack of interest is that council democracy has traditionally been considered as a wholesale alternative to the institutions of liberal parliamentary democracy. The classic vision of council democracy consists of workers' and soldiers' councils organised into a pyramidal structure that would replace liberal parliamentary institutions and capitalist production with rule by working-class council institutions and a socialist system of co-operative production. Considered in this sense, council democracy is treated as outside of the scope of liberal representative democracy and therefore of marginal interest for contemporary debates within democratic theory. In a recent examination of the field, leading democratic theorist, John Dryzek, considered council democracy a "dead duck" with very few theorists or followers.⁶⁵² Nor does council democracy feature in David Held's influential *Models of Democracy*, receiving only a cursory mention under theories of participatory democracy as an alternative that "has attracted fewer supporters."⁶⁵³ For most democratic theorists like Dryzek and Held, the councils are a forgotten relic of the past. The aim of this chapter is to challenge this prevailing interpretation and argue for a new understanding of the councils' significance for democratic theory.

The dominant conception of democracy in the study of real world democratic institutions is a liberal minimalist model. This model is based on Joseph Schumpeter's definition of democracy as an institutional arrangement in which the holders of political power are determined by competitive elections between political parties.⁶⁵⁴ Minimalist democracies aim to protect the private liberties of citizens and hold leaders accountable through elections. The benefit of this definition for its adherents is that it provides simple empirical indicators for

⁶⁵² Dryzek, "Democratic Political Theory," in Gaus and Kukathas (eds.), *Handbook of Political Theory*, 144.

⁶⁵³ David Held, *Models of Democracy* (3rd ed.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 209.

⁶⁵⁴ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 267.

measurement and is not burdened by wide-ranging normative criteria. More substantive issues of government responsiveness, levels of participation, political equality, or socio-economic disparities are excluded from consideration. In his defence of a minimalist democracy, Adam Przeworski glosses this conception as “a system in which parties lose elections.”⁶⁵⁵ This model can easily be applied to the study of democratic regimes such as in Huntington’s “two-election test” for determining the presence of a consolidated democracy. According to this test, a consolidated democracy is one in which a freely elected political party peacefully cedes power in a subsequent election.⁶⁵⁶ Although organisations such as the Freedom House and Polity IV use slightly enlarged criteria, which assess the presence of human rights, basic civil and political liberties, universal franchise and a free media, the basic conception of a liberal minimalist model remains similar.⁶⁵⁷ Scholars engaged in the study of comparative democracy or democratic transitions and consolidation also employ largely minimalist democratic criteria in their analyses.⁶⁵⁸ In fact, over the past thirty years, even as criticisms of minimal democracy have become dominant within normative political theory, the empirical criteria of the minimalist model have gained a stronger hold in the real world.⁶⁵⁹

However, there are limits in the ability of a liberal minimalist conception of democracy to tackle some of the central issues of democratic politics such as facilitating greater levels of citizen participation, controlling elites and promoting conditions of political equality. Much of the current malaise in advanced industrial democratic societies simply does not register on a minimalist model so long as a country has free and regular elections. A number of other normative theories of democracy have criticised the inadequacies of a liberal minimalist

⁶⁵⁵ Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and The Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 10. See also Adam Przeworski, “Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense,” in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (eds.), *Democracy’s Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 23–55.

⁶⁵⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991) 267. For another attempt to classify democracy according to minimalist criteria see Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For criticisms see Joe Foweraker and Roman Krznaric, “Measuring Liberal Democratic Performance: an Empirical and Conceptual Critique,” *Political Studies* (2000) 48, 759–787.

⁶⁵⁷ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2015,” available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/01152015_FIW_2015_final.pdf; Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, *Global Report 2014: Conflict, Governance and State Fragility* (Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace, 2014) available at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/globalreport.html>.

⁶⁵⁸ Andreas Schedler, “What is Democratic Consolidation?” *Journal of Democracy* (1998) 9 (2), 91–107; Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁶⁵⁹ Dryzek, “Democratic Political Theory,” in Gaus and Kukathas (eds.), *Handbook of Political Theory*, 145.

account of democratic politics and proposed alternative interpretive frameworks.⁶⁶⁰ On the one hand, deliberative democrats emphasise the central value of democratic legitimacy in decision-making, which is generated through meaningful debate between free and equal citizens.⁶⁶¹ These theorists demand greater levels of rationality and political inclusiveness from democratic institutions and insist that deliberation should take priority over the raw aggregation of votes as the principle source of democratic authority. On the other hand, radical democrats direct attention towards moments of contestation and resistance within democratic regimes and criticise liberalism's depoliticisation of democracy through legal mechanisms and universal principles.⁶⁶² For radical democrats, democracy is best characterised as oppositional practices that challenge oppression and open the possibility for new political claims and subjectivities to emerge. Radical democrats contend that the deliberative focus on reaching consensus in decision-making suppresses differences and antagonisms in addition to masking oppressive power relations.⁶⁶³

In this chapter, I turn to the democratic councils in order to articulate new possibilities in debates in democratic theory between deliberative and radical democrats on the meaning and significance of democratic agency. The councils' own vision of how democracy should be practiced is best illustrated not as a model of democracy but as a mode of democratic action. The councils practiced democracy as an ongoing resistance to forms of elite domination by introducing democratic forms of control over democracy-resistant institutions and forces. The central activity of this practice consisted of working-class forces organising to restrain recalcitrant elites, dismantle hierarchical systems and equalise power between citizens. They adopted an interventionist approach by targeting specific sources of domination in their everyday lives and demanding the extension of democratic forms of organisation into the bureaucracy, army and workplace. These forms of democratic intervention occurred across the political and economic domains in a remarkably similar manner that refused to separate

⁶⁶⁰ For an overview of some of the dominant democratic models see Archon Fung, "Democratic Theory and Political Science: A Pragmatic Method of Constructive Engagement," *American Political Science Review* (2007) 101 (3), 443–458.

⁶⁶¹ Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in Alan Hamlin and Phillip Petit (eds.), *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State* (New York: Blackwell, 1989).

⁶⁶² Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," in Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, 31–45; Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2010); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2nd ed.) (London: Verso, 2001); Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*.

⁶⁶³ Iris Marion Young, "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Theory* (2001) 29 (5), 670–690.

democratic politics from socio-economic concerns. The councils sought to extend democratic principles of equal control over all of the central institutions in society.

Examining the practices of the councils is able to highlight approaches that are neglected by both deliberative and radical democrats. Against deliberative democratic theorists, the councils were not centrally concerned with questions of democratic legitimacy achieved through the quality of decision-making processes. The councils reveal that the deliberative democratic approach is too narrowly focused on the procedures of decision-making and on questions of legitimacy to capture the most interesting and important aspects of democratic politics. I argue that deliberative democracy obscures the central democratic questions of equalising power relations between citizens and bringing oppressive institutions and forces under democratic control. The democratic actions of the councils have more in common with the constellation of authors located broadly within a radical democratic camp. In this chapter, I take Jacques Rancière as exemplary of this radical democratic tradition. One reason for this is the number of striking similarities between Rancière's and Arendt's political approach, which I analyse below. Rancière conceives of democracy as an episodic and interruptive process that destabilises established political categories and regimes. However, Rancière's emphasis on the disruptive and momentary nature of democratic politics tends to foreclose the possibility of a sustained engagement in and transformation of institutions. In contrast, the political struggles of the councils offer a more substantial account of interventions in political institutions and provide more useful tools in analysing the dynamics of institutional struggle. While reflections on the councils are not able to provide a new model of democracy, they do assist in the elaboration of novel perspectives on democratic politics.

I begin the chapter by tracing the influence of the democratic councils in political thought, arguing that there has been a neglect of the councils due to a perception of their irrelevance for contemporary democratic politics. I show that they have been largely forgotten within democratic theory, yet exalted within certain minor currents of socialist thought. Against both the councils' critics and supporters, I argue for a revised understanding of their historical role and a new appreciation of their contemporary significance. I argue that it is not an institutional model, but a mode of democratic action that is the most lasting achievement of the councils and of relevance to current debates. I sketch a number of the defining characteristics of the councils' form of democratic action as a resistance to elite domination and identify how this could shape our understanding of democracy. An analysis of the actions

of the council delegates and the political context of their struggles provides an illuminating example of the collective mobilisation of democratic actors against elites embedded in a hierarchical institutional order. I then turn to one particular domain – the workplace – in order to demonstrate how the councils sought to intervene in economic activities through the extension of principles of democratic control into this sphere. I recover a broader conception of democratic practices from the councils that includes the assertion of the necessity of democratic forms of organisation within the workplace. This expands the horizons of what we traditionally associate with democracy within the liberal tradition and offers a challenge to more restricted accounts of democratic government. Finally, I engage with other approaches in democratic theory to exhibit how the actions of the councils could be compared to the two contrasting poles of deliberative democracy and Jacques Rancière’s democratic politics.

The Councils in Political Thought

In this section, I briefly trace the influence of the councils on the subsequent development of political thought. Due to their emergence within working class political movements, the councils’ largest impact has been within the socialist tradition. Yet, even here advocates of the councils have never occupied a dominant position. A council communist ideology developed out of reflections on the Russian Revolution as a critique of the centralisation and bureaucratisation of the communist party. Adherents to this “council” or “left” communism challenged the purported universality of the Russian experience and the validity of the Leninist model of organisation. They were critical of the replacement of the self-organisation of the working class with a party leadership and advocated instead for workers’ councils as a new proletarian form of organisation for empowering the working class.⁶⁶⁴ The influence of this tendency was constrained by Lenin’s polemical critique in “‘Left-wing’ Communism: an Infantile Disorder,” ensuring supporters of the councils a heretical status within orthodox Marxism.⁶⁶⁵ Nevertheless, references to workers’ councils can be located in the work of influential figures such as Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci and Karl Korsch, as well as more prominently in marginal figures such as Anton Pannekoek, Otto Rühle and Paul Mattick.⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶⁴ Anton Pannekoek, “The German Revolution – First Stage,” *Workers Dreadnought*, 24 May 1919.

⁶⁶⁵ Lenin, “‘Left’ Communism: an Infantile Disorder”.

⁶⁶⁶ Georg Lukács, “Question of Parliamentarianism,” in Georg Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics: Political Writings, 1919–1929* (London: Verso, 1972); Gramsci, “Soviets in Italy”; Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1910–20*; Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*; Korsch, “What is Socialization? A Program of

There is little coherence or unity to this council communist tendency. Adherents had numerous theoretical differences and came from diverse backgrounds. They also participated in a variety of groupings and organisations, particularly within the Dutch, Italian and German sections of the International.

For a generation of writers, many of whom participated in the dramatic uprisings of the 1917-1921 period, the councils played a decisive role in the development of their thought. The councils were viewed as exemplary institutions, which were the most advanced expression of working class consciousness and organisation. Following his conversion to Marxism in 1918, Lukács considered the councils an ideal institution for authentic proletarian political activity. Lukács was the Deputy Commissar of Public Education in the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic from April to August 1918 and participated in the political debates surrounding the council form. In his 1920 essay, "Question of Parliamentarianism," he describes the councils as the "true index" of the proletarian revolution whose mere existence "points the way forward beyond bourgeois society."⁶⁶⁷ However, Lukács never completely abandoned his admiration for a Leninist party. His writings in this early period contain a mixture of support for both councils and a vanguard party. During the 1920s there is a general erosion of support for the councils and an increasing predominance of the party in his work.⁶⁶⁸

In contrast, Karl Korsch was a much firmer believer in the possibilities of the council system, serving as a delegate on one of the German soldiers' councils in 1917 and on the Socialisation Committee in 1918.⁶⁶⁹ In his conception, the councils were sovereign organs representing the political and economic power of the proletariat. He called for a socialist republic of workers' councils in which they would hold full executive, legislative and judicial power, thereby destroying the old bureaucracy and political structures of the bourgeois regime. In a 1921 essay, "Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany," Korsch was critical of the ideological confusions of those who preferred to exercise mere oversight and control over existing governmental apparatuses, since this failed to recognise what for him

Practical Socialism"; Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*; Rühle, *Non-Leninist Marxism*; Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (Wales: The Merlin Press, 2007). For discussion of the influence of the councils on Schumpeter, Lenin and Arendt see Medearis, "Lost or Obscured? How V. I. Lenin, Joseph Schumpeter and Hannah Arendt Misunderstood the Council Movement".

⁶⁶⁷ Lukács, "The Question of Parliamentarianism," 53–63.

⁶⁶⁸ Russel Jacoby, *Dialectics of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 89.

⁶⁶⁹ Kellner, "Korsch's Revolutionary Marxism," in *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, 9.

were the true tasks of the councils.⁶⁷⁰ The majority of his practical activity focussed on the theme of the socialisation of the economy, which he argued should be carried out immediately through the expropriation of productive resources from the capitalist class, placing them under democratic control.⁶⁷¹ Korsch would continually return to the problem of workers' councils throughout his life as an authentic form of workers' organisation. Antonio Gramsci, on the other hand, had a much briefer flirtation with the councils. Gramsci was a member of the Italian Socialist Party and in April 1919 began editing the weekly newspaper *L'Ordine Nuovo*. In a series of articles written for the newspaper, Gramsci advocated for workers involved in political disputes in Turin companies to convert their factory commissions into workers' councils. He argued that such councils would be "organs of proletarian power which will replace the capitalist in all his useful functions of direction and administration."⁶⁷² However, the political failure of the Turin councils led Gramsci to conclude that the working class required a Leninist vanguard party to avoid further defeats.⁶⁷³

The councils were also an inspiration for members of the Frankfurt School, informing their conception of socialism as based on a collectively controlled society.⁶⁷⁴ In one of Horkheimer's early essays, he declared that:

the modalities of the new society are first found in the process of social transformation. The theoretical conception which, following its first trailblazers, will show the new society its way - the system of workers' councils - grows out of praxis. The roots of the council system go back to 1871, 1905, and other events. Revolutionary transformation has a tradition that must continue.⁶⁷⁵

The influence of the councils is more pronounced, however, in the younger Marcuse, who became politicised through his involvement in the councils of the 1918-1919 German Revolution. His experience in the councils decisively shaped his political views and presented an image of a future classless society.⁶⁷⁶ Although Marcuse rejected demands for a precise institutional model of a post-revolutionary society, he viewed the councils as "a seminal

⁶⁷⁰ Korsch, "Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany".

⁶⁷¹ Korsch, "What is Socialisation? A Program of Practical Socialism".

⁶⁷² Antonio Gramsci, "Workers' Democracy," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 21 June 1919.

⁶⁷³ Antonio Gramsci, "Theses for the 3rd Congress," (Rome 1926).

⁶⁷⁴ On the connection between the workers councils and Frankfurt School see Phil Slater, *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School: A Marxist Perspective* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

⁶⁷⁵ Max Horkheimer, "The Authoritarian State," in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982) 104.

⁶⁷⁶ Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 16.

achievement of the revolutionary tradition” that pre-figured the “new adequate sources of initiative, organization, and leadership,” which he hoped would be enacted by the New Left.⁶⁷⁷ Central to Marcuse’s conception is the councils’ practice of self-government and self-determination, which reveals their central political task of actualising the freedom of those oppressed under bourgeois rule. Following the decline of the Left in the late 1970s, there is a gradual receding of the councils from socialist thought as groups turn to new forms of a “third way” between state socialism and capitalism. Indicative of the changing fate of the councils, the leading representative of the next generation of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas, considered the idea of a society integrated through associations such as the councils “always utopian.”⁶⁷⁸ He contended that the “idea of workers’ self-governance had to fail” and that “today it is even less workable” given the growing social complexity and organisational needs of modern society.⁶⁷⁹ Admiration for the councils continues in certain forms of anarchism, socialism and Left Marxism, but they have become far less prominent in contemporary debates.⁶⁸⁰ There are only a small number of adherents to council communism for whom the councils still represent both a guiding ideal and a viable institutional form for class struggle today.⁶⁸¹

Although they continue to appear in the background of radical European thought, the prospects of council democracy have exercised very little hold over contemporary democratic theory. The one prominent exception is C. B. Macpherson’s *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*.⁶⁸² In this text, Macpherson advocates for a form of participatory democracy that is based on a pyramidal model of councils with direct democracy at its base and recallable delegates at every other level. While Macpherson distances himself from Russian state socialism, it is clear that the experiences of the democratic councils of the early twentieth century are the basis of his model. One could also refer to other theories of participatory democracy in the 1970s such as Carole Pateman’s *Participation and Democratic Theory*, although Pateman’s reference points are G. D. H. Cole’s guild socialism and Yugoslavian

⁶⁷⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 44.

⁶⁷⁸ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 481.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 479. But since these remarks Habermas has altered his view and now concedes that models of market socialism “pick up the correct idea of retaining a market economy’s effective steering effects and impulses without at the same time accepting the negative consequences of a systemically reproduced distribution of ‘bads’ and ‘goods’.” Jürgen Habermas, “A Conversation about Questions of Political Theory,” in *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 141–142.

⁶⁸⁰ Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Hungarian Source,” *Political and Social Writings, Vol. 3* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 250–271.

⁶⁸¹ Schulman (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*.

⁶⁸² Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*.

worker self-management, rather than the councils of the early twentieth century.⁶⁸³ Yet, one must go back over forty years to find examples of prominent and widely read accounts of democratic forms of government influenced by the councils.⁶⁸⁴ It would not be an overstatement to say that council democracy has little to no influence on current debates within democratic theory. There is no part of the world where there is currently a strong push for the replacement of the institutions of liberal democracy with a system of councils.⁶⁸⁵ It is considered as an outdated and impractical alternative to liberal democracy that has since become irrelevant.

Retrieving the Councils

The perceived impracticality and undesirability of a council system has led to a neglect of the potential resources that could be gathered from an examination of the political struggles of the councils. For most democrats, the implausible nature of this system has led such proposals to be dismissed as unfeasible and utopian. For a much smaller minority of radical political thinkers, council democracy offers an alternative institutional model for a socialist form of government. The councils still function in the realms of certain Marxist and syndicalist discourse as a utopian ideal of an “other” of liberal democratic institutions, representing an emancipated beyond in which exploitation and domination will have ceased to exist. However, whether viewed from the perspective of the perils of a council dictatorship or the utopian possibilities of a council republic, this opposition has become a barrier to conceptual development. I contend that there is a more productive perspective on the history of the councils than either the critics or defenders of the councils acknowledge.

Considering the councils as a wholesale replacement of the basic institutions of a liberal democratic society is only one possible interpretation of their contemporary significance. Certainly, there were political actors at the time who held such a view of the prospects of a

⁶⁸³ Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*.

⁶⁸⁴ For recent discussion of the similar concept of workplace democracy see Hélène Landemore and Isabelle Ferreras, “In Defense of Workplace Democracy: Towards a Justification of the Firm–State Analogy,” *Political Theory* (forthcoming).

⁶⁸⁵ Notwithstanding the criticisms and widespread discontent with liberal institutions, major studies have found little evidence of a desire for a full system overhaul. See Norris, *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*; Pharr and Putnam, *Disaffected Democracies: What’s Troubling the Trilateral Countries?*; Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*.

council republic. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht of the Spartacus League and Richard Müller and Ernst Däumig of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards are examples of this perspective. For Däumig, the councils heralded a new era in which the institutions of bourgeois democracy, with its ballots, parliaments and system of private property, would give way to an emerging proletariat democracy, embodied in a fully functioning council system. The shift from bourgeois society to the more advanced form of human organisation found in a council republic was inevitable for Däumig because “the council system is, and has to be, the organizational structure of modern revolutions.”⁶⁸⁶

However, this view of the historical task of the councils was contested then and continues to be debated today. A historical examination of the European councils of the early twentieth century reveals a more disputed legacy with a number of competing conceptions of the proper role of the councils. As we have seen in chapter two, the majority of participants in the councils tended to view them as democratic control organs of government action rather than as alternative governance structures. The ambiguity in the council form allows for multiple interpretations and competing attempts at reclaiming their legacy for the present. We misunderstand the intentions and actions of council delegates if we conceive of their project primarily as a striving for the institutions of an ideal council state. Instead of imagining a utopian beyond, the councils engaged in pragmatic experimentation with concrete solutions to immediate problems. They sought practical ways to radically transform society and the state by deepening and extending existing democratic freedoms towards their emancipatory horizons.⁶⁸⁷

A problem with the radical socialist view of the councils as an appropriate institutional model for the present is that it overlooks the historical specificities that connect the councils to a particular historical epoch and socio-economic environment. Many of the reasons why the councils were initially so successful are based on historical conditions that no longer exist and political analyses with limited contemporary applicability. There have been important changes in capitalist modes of production and the organisation of labour that make workers’ councils a less relevant and suitable institutional form for contemporary politics. Very briefly stated, the majority of the workforce is no longer composed of a concentration of industrial workers in large factories, correlating to a potentially powerful and united proletariat that

⁶⁸⁶ Däumig, “The National Assembly Means the Councils’ Death,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 42.

⁶⁸⁷ Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the fall of the Old Regime*, 3.

could be organised through face-to-face interaction in a council organisation.⁶⁸⁸ Post-Fordist changes to production and labour have fragmented the workforce through measures of subcontracting and outsourcing. In its neoliberal variation, capitalism has also become more fluid, moving with greater ease across borders and utilising more sophisticated forms of political and economic governance that defy simple control by workers' councils.⁶⁸⁹

Arguing for a direct reproduction of the exact institutions of a council system in this altered environment treats the councils as a universal form of political struggle that remains constant in spite of changing historical circumstances. This argument was first posed by Karl Korsch who was wary of the hypostatisation of any given political form of revolutionary organisation. A strong advocate of the councils when they arose, Korsch was sceptical of attempts at applying this model after it had been historically defeated in the early 1920s. He argued against seizing on to the councils, or any other particular institution, "as a singularly appropriate and potential form of the revolutionary proletarian class dictatorship."⁶⁹⁰ Despite the fact that the councils were "a positive form of development of a revolutionary proletarian class will surging toward realization," they must always be seen as the "organizational results of a certain historical phase of revolutionary class struggle."⁶⁹¹ The determination of the suitability of council-like institutions for a future socialist republic would have to be the result of an analysis of the concrete relations of a particular historical situation rather than on the basis of an abstract theory of politics as such.

Moreover, there are good reasons internal to the structure of the councils that give us cause to doubt whether this model would be a more genuine realisation of democratic principles than current institutional arrangements. Following Marx's criticisms of the doctrine of a separation of powers, advocates of a council democracy have usually called for a unified legislature and executive with complete power in the hands of a central council organ.⁶⁹² However, the lack of an independent judiciary and constitutionally guaranteed rights would fail to safeguard

⁶⁸⁸ Ness and Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master Ours to Own*, 7.

⁶⁸⁹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶⁹⁰ Karl Korsch, "Revolutionary Commune," *Die Aktion* (1929) 19, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1929/commune.htm>.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.

⁶⁹² Däumig, "The National Assembly Means the Councils' Death," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 48; Luxemburg, "What does the Spartacus League Want?" in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 101. However, Marxists are not unanimous in their desire for an elimination of a separation of powers. Karl Kautsky is one example of an attempt immediately following the Russian Revolution to advocate for a proper separation of powers.

citizen's civil liberties. The fear of critics is that the direct expression of the will of the proletariat through a government with undivided power would open the pathway to the violation of rights and the crushing of dissenting minorities. While the history of the Russian Revolution does not provide conclusive proof that such illiberal tendencies would eventuate in every council system, it does give added weight to concerns of the potential for rights violations. In the next section, I trace an alternative path for drawing resources from the councils through an analysis of their distinctive form of democratic action, which I characterise as a resistance to elite domination.

Democratic Action as Resistance to Elite Domination

The democratic actions of the councils were conceived as part of an ongoing struggle against the centralising flows of state power and the tendencies of elites to dominate less powerful political actors. Due to unequal power relations in social formations, political and economic elites are able to leverage their power to further entrench inequalities by inscribing them in political institutions. Elites at the apex of social hierarchies have tended to subvert political institutions to their own ends and to undermine attempts at challenging their power.⁶⁹³ The democratic practices of the councils sought to counter this predisposition of elites through a renewed emphasis on reversing relations of power and instituting more egalitarian forms of governance. In this sense, the strategy of the councils directs attention towards the oppositional and agonistic dimensions of democratic action. In addition to the more traditional activities of deliberating, organising and decision-making, the activities of the councils involved challenging established power structures and subverting systems of elite rule. They reveal the importance and necessity of these aspects of democratic politics that fall outside of processes of rational deliberation.

The starting point of the councils' political struggle was the existence of oppressive structures that reinforced systems of domination and exploitation. When the councils first arose across Europe in 1917-1918 they faced a bleak picture of monarchical regimes with deeply entrenched privilege and hierarchy. The creation of the German councils followed a decision

⁶⁹³ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); Robert D. Putnam, *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1976); John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

by the Imperial Naval Command on 24 October 1918 to launch a folly and suicidal final attack on allied forces in the English Channel. Facing imminent defeat, the German Admiralty refused to surrender without a final “honourable battle” to restore the tarnished reputation of the German navy.⁶⁹⁴ Not wishing to become a sacrifice to the German war machine, soldiers organised, resisted, rebelled and finally mutinied against their commanders. The planned attack eventually ground to a halt as workers self-organised and formed councils to direct and co-ordinate their activities.

The first point to emphasise in this episode is the oppositional character of the councils’ actions as a resistance to the domination of political and economic elites.⁶⁹⁵ Democratic action takes place within a strategic relation of forces in which existing structures already shape the field of possible actions. To act is to negotiate this environment and challenge the way in which dominant institutions limit and constrain individuals within it. In this setting, actors must contest and democratise relations of governance from below. The most immediate task of the councils was to push back against existing forms of domination that controlled their lives. It was the council delegates’ desire for greater levels of freedom and self-determination that led them to oppose the plans of the old elite. When the soldiers’ councils began to organise and issued their first demands in the Kiel “Fourteen Points,” the military apparatus was their primary target.⁶⁹⁶ They sought to dismantle the complex systems that imposed strict discipline upon them and would have sent them to their senseless deaths.

A second important aspect of the councils’ resistance to domination was its direct intervention into previously closed and hierarchical structures. The councils challenged entrenched powerful interests by attempting to intrude into spheres from which their voices had been excluded. Their strategy was therefore transformative and interventionist. They created novel political actions by claiming to have a right to exercise democratic control over institutions where no such right had existed. Unsurprisingly, the first targets of the council delegates were the immediate sources of their daily oppression: the factory and the barracks, which were

⁶⁹⁴ Andrew Wiest, *The Western Front 1917–1918* (London: Amber Books, 2008) 208.

⁶⁹⁵ For a more in-depth exploration of the important oppositional character of democratic action see John Medearis, *Why Democracy is Oppositional* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁶⁹⁶ “Schleswig-Holsteinische Volkszeitung,” 5 November 1918; reprinted in Kurt Ahnert, *Die Entwicklung der deutschen Revolution und das Kriegsende in der Zeit vom 1. Oktober bis 30. November 1918 in Leitartikeln, Extrablättern, Telegrammen, Aufrufen und Verordnungen nach den führenden deutschen Zeitungen* [*The Development of the German Revolution and the End of the War in the Period from October 1 to November 30, 1918, in Lead Articles, Special Supplements, Telegrams, Appeals, and Decrees Published in the Leading German Newspapers*] (Nuremberg: Der Burgverlag, 1918) 156–157.

among the most rigid and authoritarian institutions in Europe. A soldier previously had no right to question an admiral's commands, nor a worker the ability to organise and manage a factory. Extensive reforms were proposed that would have overturned and reconfigured these institutions. Along these lines, workers called for a range of measures, including an eight-hour working day, minimum wages, the socialisation of large industries and a transition from rule by factory managers to workers' control. The radical program of the councils terrified the old elite whose power would be dramatically curtailed through such processes of democratisation.

The councils also directly intervened into the affairs of the government and the conservative civil service. In Russia, one of the main functions of the councils was to act as "control organs of revolutionary democracy," supervising the activities of the provisional government and ensuring its compliance with the democratic program of the workers.⁶⁹⁷ Similarly, in Germany, when a new provisional government was appointed in November 1918, the Executive Council of Berlin demanded a "right of control" over their activities.⁶⁹⁸ The councils did not stand aloof from or ignore the operation of the central institutions of power in their society. They attempted to open oppressive structures to forms of democratic control through coercing sceptical and recalcitrant elites. To this end, the councils attempted to utilise their strong power base to vigorously control government action. However, the councils were not always successful in this endeavour. The difficulties encountered in their attempts to control the central apparatuses of the state were viewed by a number of socialist commentators to be the principle reason behind the failure of the revolution to achieve its main objectives. Ernst Däumig would later lament the inability of the councils to democratise the bureaucracy, which left a significant amount of the structural power of the old regime intact.⁶⁹⁹ As a result, when the power of the councils was challenged and eroded, their political program disappeared with them, leaving the elites free to reassert their control.

Third, the democratic actions of the councils were self-consciously class-oriented towards promoting the interests of the lower classes and restraining the dominating tendencies of the political and economic elite. This was reflected in the socio-economic composition of the

⁶⁹⁷ "To the People of Petrograd and Russia from the Soviet of Workers' Deputies" in Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *The Russian Provisional Government: Documents Vol. 1*, 78; Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 130.

⁶⁹⁸ Ritter and Miller (eds.), *Die Deutsche Revolution: Dokumente*, 119. Although, Walter Oehme later commented that the Executive Council never exercised actual control over the provisional government nor could it have due to a lack of administrative apparatuses in the important ministries and offices. Walter Oehme, *Damals in der Reichskanzlei: Erinnerungen aus den Jahren 1918/1919* (Berlin: Kongress Verlag, 1958) 122.

⁶⁹⁹ Däumig, "The National Assembly Means the Councils' Death," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 48.

councils, the class-content of their ideology and their practical political programs. As a historically distinctive democratic organisational form, the councils were the only political institutions of the time that were composed of elements of the working class.⁷⁰⁰ An examination of the historical material reveals that it was “the workers,” “the soldiers” and “the proletariat” that were constantly evoked as the political subject represented by the councils, often in opposition to the bourgeoisie and the government bureaucracy. The perception of the councils at the time was that they were intimately connected to the lower strata of the population who lacked other institutional forms of political agency. The councils organised segments of society that had previously been marginalised and had no political voice in the old regime.

The ideology of the councils was also attentive to socio-economic differences between classes and the class-driven nature of political conflict. This is demonstrated by the contest over the meaning of democracy during this period.⁷⁰¹ It would be anachronistic to believe that democracy had the same content for the revolutionaries as it does for us today.⁷⁰² The way in which the language of democracy was employed in Russia in 1917 exhibited a strong influence of a socialist conception of class and antipathy towards the elite. Historian, Boris Kolonitskii, argues that during the February revolution in Russia “democratic was often used as the opposite not of dictatorship or autocracy, but of the upper and even middle classes, toward whom it was antagonistic.”⁷⁰³ Democracy had quite specific connotations during this period and was used as a term of self-identification by all of the socialist groups and often served as a synonym for the “democratic strata” or “democratic classes.” The term “democratic camp” [*demokraticheskii lager*] designated the forces of the working masses and the socialist intelligentsia who supported the councils. While there was much division between the various socialist groups in Russia, they all agreed on the term “revolutionary democracy” as that which distinguished them from the conservatives and the bourgeoisie.⁷⁰⁴ From the Provisional Government, Alexander Kerensky was able to offer “a bow to all democracy: to workers, soldiers, and peasants.”⁷⁰⁵ Another example is the authors of the

⁷⁰⁰ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 4–5.

⁷⁰¹ Däumig, “The Council Idea and its Realization,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 54.

⁷⁰² For an overview of the historical contingency of the concept of democracy see Russell L. Hanson, “Democracy,” in Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell L. Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 68–89.

⁷⁰³ Boris Kolonitskii, “‘Democracy’ in the Political Consciousness of the February Revolution,” in Rex A. Wade (ed.), *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) 75.

⁷⁰⁴ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 76.

⁷⁰⁵ Alexander Kerensky, *Russia and History’s Turning Point* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1965) 411.

Guide to Political Terms and Politicians published in Russia by a moderate liberal publishing house in 1917 who defined democracy as “all classes in a country who live by their own labor: workers, peasants, servants, intelligentsia.”⁷⁰⁶ It was liberals such as the Kadets and other propertied elements of society that were excluded through the use of this term. Liberalism was an unpopular political ideology at the time and was considered the language of the elite.⁷⁰⁷

In Germany, there was also a struggle over the meaning and interpretation of the concept of democracy. The SPD, who were supporters of a call for a national assembly and the dismantling of the councils, preferred to frame the question as “democracy or dictatorship,” painting the councils as a dangerous flirtation with a Bolshevik dictatorship. When faced with the rise of the council system in Germany, all shades of reactionaries and conservatives were suddenly fervent believers in democracy and favoured the election of a national assembly for liberal parliamentary institutions. However, although there was a general consensus that the new republic would be a democratic regime, the true question concerned what form that democracy would take. At this stage, the bourgeoisie viewed parliamentary elections and the dissolution of the councils as the best method to transform their economic dominance into political power and restore the position of the old elites. By restricting struggle to electoral politics, it was hoped that the domain of contestation could be shifted away from more wide-ranging demands of socialisation and positioned within the framework of a liberal political order. In light of this, the opposition of certain council delegates to the national assembly can be viewed not as a rejection of democratic principles, but as a desire to extend these beyond the limits of bourgeois democracy and parliamentarianism. As Gustav Landauer exclaimed, “[d]emocracy as self-determination of the people, and of individual groups among the people, is something entirely different to the nonsense of elections, which means abdication of power by the people and governing of an oligarchy.”⁷⁰⁸ Democracy, to the radical socialists, entailed a broader program of the democratisation of society and the economy. They did not view democracy in the sociologically anonymous terms of liberal discourse but through the understanding of the basic class antagonisms that would proliferate without more thoroughgoing reforms.

⁷⁰⁶ Quoted in Kolonitskii, “‘Democracy’ in the Political Consciousness of the February Revolution,” in Wade (ed.), *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches*, 82.

⁷⁰⁷ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 129–130; See also Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the fall of the Old Regime*, 18–19.

⁷⁰⁸ Gustav Landauer, “The United Republics of Germany and Their Constitution,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 200.

Fourth, the councils also structured their own internal affairs to offer a more accountable system to rank and file members. Democracy was not seen as something external to the movement that could be achieved from above through the correct procedures and governmental institutions. The movement itself represented the democratic ideals that it sought to create in broader society. Delegates in the councils worked under imperative mandates and were directly recallable by their electors. This mechanism ensured that if the delegate did not perform their function appropriately their mandate could be revoked and a new delegate elected in their place. There was an open channel of communication between electors and delegate, which allowed for the continual flow of information and for the delegate to accurately reflect the views of their electors. One of the clear benefits of this model was that a political class could not develop, which could then exercise power against the interests of the electors. It was important for genuine power to remain at the lowest levels of the councils and not centralise towards a single administrative organ. Däumig warned that “[t]he bodies of the council system cannot hold any powers long-term but must be under constant control by the voters who can recall councils or council members whenever they have lost their trust.”⁷⁰⁹ This situation occurred on several occasions, including when council delegates in Russia voted for a “Liberty Loan” to assist the Provisional Government to continue the war. This was deeply unpopular with many workers and led to several delegates being recalled.⁷¹⁰ Internal forms of accountability to ordinary workers were seen as of equal importance to the broader role of the councils as maintaining a tight control over government activity.

Fifth, the democratic program of the councils was connected to a deeper vision of human emancipation, which was couched in terms of ideological transformation and cultural rejuvenation. This transformation had to take place at every level of society and not be simply the result of the actions of elite political actors. Instead, the councils aimed for the involvement of all individuals in authoritative decision-making processes concerning the basic structures of society. Ernst Däumig argued that “it is mandatory to make it a true people’s movement that includes the bottom of society.”⁷¹¹ The creation of institutionalised spaces of democratic participation within the council structure permitted the cultivation of

⁷⁰⁹ Däumig, “The Council Idea and its Realization,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 52–53.

⁷¹⁰ Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the fall of the Old Regime*, 73.

⁷¹¹ Däumig, “The National Assembly Means the Councils’ Death,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 41.

new forms of democratic agency. This fostered the discussion and deliberation of political ideas, extending democratic agency beyond periodic participation in electoral institutions. In Russia, the soviets called for “the entire population to establish the people’s authority in the districts of Petrograd. We invite the entire population of the capital to rally at once to the soviet, to organize local committees in their districts, and to take into their hands the management of local affairs.”⁷¹² Däumig anticipated “a Germany whose affairs are really determined by active people doing more than running to the ballot box every two or three years.”⁷¹³ Increased political activity was viewed as a vital element of the continuation of the revolution’s goals. “It can only be changed by a dedicated attempt to make and keep the German people politically active,” Däumig continued, “this can *only* happen in the council system.”⁷¹⁴ The councils attempted to organise a transition to a more participatory society in which citizens would be accustomed to playing an active role in political life.

A significant barrier to this rejuvenation of political life was the cultural and ideological limitations of people who were accustomed to centuries of despotism. The problem could not be addressed by establishing new political institutions as the oppressive relations were deeply rooted in the national psyche and could only be overcome through more profound changes of mentality. Gustav Landauer imagined “a new humanity and a new spirit” that would be born out of such “fundamental social transformations” to Germany society.⁷¹⁵ He viewed the development of the German peoples’ spirit as a necessary requirement for realizing the political goals of the revolution. A striking example of the contradictions of the period is given by British diplomat, George Buchanan, who recalled a conversation with a Russian soldier in the early days of the revolution. The soldier noted: “Oh, yes, we must have a republic, but we must have a good tsar at the head.”⁷¹⁶ This mixture of democratic sentiment and a monarchist mentality indicates that a change in political leadership does not automatically overturn the dominant culture of the expectation of rulership by a sovereign monarch. The question for the councils was how to overthrow such deep-seated mental structures that were maintained by the dominant culture and ideology. There were no doubts

⁷¹² “To the People of Petrograd and Russia from the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies,” in Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *The Russian Provisional Government: Documents Vol. 1*, 78.

⁷¹³ Däumig, “The National Assembly Means the Councils’ Death,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 43.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Gustav Landauer, “Letter to Leo Kestenberg, Krumbach (Swabia), 22 November 1918,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 173–174. See also Gustav Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings: A Political Reader*, ed. Gabriel Kuhn (Oakland: PM Press, 2010).

⁷¹⁶ George Buchanan, *My Mission to Russia and Other Diplomatic Memories* (London: Cassell and Company, 1923) 84.

that such a process would take time and could not be accomplished overnight. Däumig believed that “the German people have to get used to self-management instead of governance” and that “the new world can only be built by the political, economic, and cultural activities of the entire German people.”⁷¹⁷ The battle for human emancipation, then, was not restricted to the institutional sphere but was also fought on the level of ideology, entailing a control over education, schools and the cultural forces that still aimed to stifle the revolution.

Nobody was a keener observer of this problem than Anton Pannekoek, who saw that the problem of ideology lay at the centre of the revolution:

In November 1918, state power slipped from the nerveless grasp of the bourgeoisie in Germany and Austria . . . the masses were in control; and the bourgeoisie was nevertheless able to build this state power up again and once more subjugate the workers. This proves that the bourgeoisie possessed another hidden source of power which had remained intact and which permitted it to re-establish its hegemony when everything seemed shattered. This hidden power is the bourgeoisie’s ideological hold over the proletariat. Because the proletarian masses were still completely governed by a bourgeois mentality, they restored the hegemony of the bourgeoisie with their own hands after it had collapsed.⁷¹⁸

The strength of the bourgeoisie, in Pannekoek’s view, did not emanate solely from their economic or political resources, but from their control of cultural institutions and political discourse. Pannekoek turned attention towards the question of a people’s “spirit” [*Geist*], or more precisely the role that class-consciousness and ideology played in political struggle. A true revolution would have to bring about a change of consciousness and a gradual development in the political ideology of the masses. He believed that the workers must combat the “spiritual superiority of the ruling minority” which “presides over all spiritual development, all science.”⁷¹⁹ For Pannekoek it was this “spiritual dependence of the proletariat on the bourgeoisie,” which represented the “main cause of the weakness of the proletariat.”⁷²⁰ A culture that promoted human freedom and emancipation had to be incorporated into the new institutions of the political regime.

⁷¹⁷ Däumig, “The National Assembly Means the Councils’ Death,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 48.

⁷¹⁸ Anton Pannekoek, “World Revolution and Communist Tactics,” in D. A. Smart (ed.), *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1978) 130.

⁷¹⁹ Anton Pannekoek, “Massenaktion und Revolution,” *Die Neue Zeit* (1912) 11, 609–616.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*

In the next section, I turn to the concept of economic democracy in order to focus on one specific domain targeted by the councils through their mode of democratic action.⁷²¹ I examine the councils' argument for the extension of democratic forms of control into workplaces and over productive assets in the economy. The transformation of workplaces and the economy is just one example of an argument that could be raised in relation to other hierarchical institutions and domains such as the judiciary, transnational governance bodies, financial institutions, universities and government bureaucracies. Here, I intend only to sketch the outline of their argument for an economic democracy in order to provide one important example of the democratic approach of the councils in more detail.

Economic Democracy

The liberal conception of democracy is based on a separation of the public, political sphere from the private, economic one. In liberal societies, citizens have equal civic and political rights in the public sphere and the freedom to engage in any economic activity without the use of force or fraud in their private lives. One of the most interesting and politically pertinent innovations of the councils was their introduction of democratic forms of organisation into the economic sphere. The councils' demand for "revolutionary democracy" was not restricted to the establishment of parliamentary institutions and a national vote. It incorporated a broader vision of control over workplaces and the social ownership of the means of production.⁷²²

⁷²¹ There is no standard usage of the term economic democracy, which only became commonly used in the 1980s. In this section, I consider the councils' form of economic democracy as an argument for democratic control over workplaces and the productive assets of the economy. Council delegates usually framed the argument of economic democracy in terms of a "socialisation of the economy" or "socialisation of industry." Authors such as Robert Dahl and David Ellerman use economic democracy as a synonym for workplace democracy. More recently, Tom Malleon has argued that a compelling account of economic democracy in the twenty-first century would have to include considerations of power exercised over workplaces, finance and investment. While acknowledging the importance of this broader scope, my analysis focuses primarily on the councils' arguments of control over workplaces and productive assets. See Tom Malleon, *After Occupy: Economic Democracy for the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). For the classic statements of economic democracy see Robin Archer, *Economic Democracy: The Politics of Feasible Socialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); David Ellerman, *Property and Contract in Economics: The Case for Economic Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992); Donald George, *Economic Democracy: The Political Economy of Self-Management and Participation* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993); Seymour Melman, *After Capitalism: From Managerialism to Workplace Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); J. W. Smith, *Economic Democracy: The Political Struggle of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁷²² See Dick Geary, "Radicalism and the Worker: Metalworkers and Revolution 1912–23," in Richard J. Evans (ed.), *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1979) 267–270; Steve Smith, "Factory Committees," in Edward Acton, Vladimir Cherniaev and William Rosenberg (eds.), *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution, 1914–1921* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001) 346–358.

Council delegates connected questions of political power with control over productive resources and relations of economic dependence. They were acutely aware of the insufficiencies of formal political liberties when they had little influence over the structure of workplaces. Workers spent the majority of their lives in the factories, but they had barely any say in how they were managed and operated. Their political struggles therefore addressed forms of economic domination in addition to the pursuit of civic liberties. In this section, I pursue two primary tasks. First, I argue for the contemporary relevance of the councils' attentiveness to the economic sphere as a potential source of domination. To this end, I compare the liberal conceptualisation of the relationship between the political and economic spheres with that of the councils in order to contribute to contemporary debates in democratic theory. Second, I contend that the councils deployed a two-tier model of structural domination operating at the level of the workplace and at the level of a market system of wage labour. The distinctive normative argument put forward by the councils is that workplaces and the economy must be transformed to remove these illegitimate forms of domination from workers' lives.

To better understand the arguments of the councils let me briefly begin with how the question of democratic relations in the economic sphere is currently conceived in mainstream liberal democratic theory. In liberal discourse, the workplace is viewed as a private realm in which employers and employees are free to enter into voluntary employment contracts in order to produce goods and services. The problem of the unjustified operation of power does not arise from this liberal perspective because in a voluntary relationship "the employee 'orders' the owner ... to pay him money in the same sense that the employer directs ... [the employee] to perform certain tasks. The employee can terminate the contract as readily as can the employer."⁷²³ Liberal theorists argue that democratic control over the economy would remove the exercise of consumer choice necessary to produce price indicators, which establish the value of goods and sustain free markets.⁷²⁴ In this sense, democratic forms of organisation in the marketplace would hinder the efficiency and productivity of the economy. Political equality is guaranteed in liberal societies by universal suffrage and civic freedoms that establish a formal equality of rights and opportunities. The state maintains a system of

⁷²³ Armen Alchian and Harold Demsetz, "Production, Information Costs, and Economic Organization," *The American Economic Review* (1972) 62 (5), 777–795, 783.

⁷²⁴ For a classic statement of this position see Ludwig V. Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1953). It is also worth noting that there are socialist forms of workplace democracy that are compatible with free markets, although this is not what council delegates were advocating. See David Schweickart, *After Capitalism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

negative liberties that prevents other citizens and the state from interfering in citizens' private lives. These basic political freedoms allow for the economic freedom of disposing of one's property as one sees fit and entering into contractual agreements with other individuals or firms.⁷²⁵ While liberalism has a long tradition of egalitarianism, which seeks to redress economic inequalities through various forms of wealth redistribution, this concern does not usually extend to support for forms of workplace democracy.⁷²⁶

In contrast, the councils drew attention to forms of domination that could occur in the economic sphere through the unequal control of economic resources in spite of notionally equal political rights. They challenged liberalism's naturalised view of the economic sphere as a private realm of exchange between free agents and highlighted the pervasive structural inequalities that existed between workers and capitalists. Without sufficient economic resources to ensure their independence, citizens faced the possible arbitrary interference of their employers in the workplace. The reality for most workers was that they were "ruled by an economically privileged minority."⁷²⁷ In order to realise freedom in both the political and economic spheres adjustments would need to be made to institutional arrangements and the organisation of work. Ernst Däumig asserted that we "need workers to be in charge of their shops and factories through the councils they trust."⁷²⁸ This broader goal of freedom from economic forms of domination was expressed in different terms, sometimes as a "social democracy," elsewhere as a "proletarian democracy," but the underlying principles, if not the methods for achieving them, were reasonably similar.⁷²⁹ David Mandel argues that "[o]ne cannot avoid the conclusion that for the workers the February Days [in Russia, 1917] were

⁷²⁵ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 12.

⁷²⁶ The most notable exception is John Stuart Mill who argues that "the relation of masters and workpeople will be gradually superseded by partnership. ... The form of association, however, which if mankind continue to improve, must be expected in the end to predominate, is not that which can exist between a capitalist as chief, and workpeople without a voice in the management, but the association of the labourers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves." John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 129. In *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls also raises questions of workplace democracy, emphasising that they "call for careful examination." Rawls sees the challenge of workplace democracy as "a major difficulty" and that the "long-run prospects of a just constitutional regime" will depend on appropriately addressing these concerns. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 178–179. For an argument that pushes a Rawlsian system in this direction see David Schweikart, "Should Rawls be a Socialist? A Comparison of his Ideal Capitalism with Worker-Controlled Socialism," *Social Theory and Practice* (1978) 5, 1–27. Another eloquent defender of workplace democracy in the liberal tradition is John Dewey. See John Dewey, "The Economic Basis of the New Society," in *John Dewey: The Later Works Vol. 13: 1938–1939* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988) 309–322.

⁷²⁷ Däumig, "The National Assembly Means the Councils' Death," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 46.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁷²⁹ Müller, "Democracy or Dictatorship," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 74.

more than a political action directed against autocracy but equally an economic strike against capital.”⁷³⁰ In this way, the councils attempted to channel the worker’s demands for democratisation into dismantling the hierarchical structures of the workplace and replacing them with responsive and accountable democratic forms of control.

Much could be gained from a return to this broader conception of democratic practices that incorporates economic as well political considerations into the necessary framework of democratic life. Questions of economic democracy are rarely considered relevant for liberal democratic theorists today. Diamond and Allcorn note that “workplace democracy is but a faint whisper among contemporary social science and management scholars.”⁷³¹ Current democratic theorists focus on questions of political institutions and tend to elide economic considerations. Nor are these issues frequently attended to by republican democratic theory or new theories of democratic innovations.⁷³² This criticism has been recently restated by Carole Pateman in her 2011 APSA Presidential Address. In this speech, she reiterated that “there is little discussion either of the feasibility or desirability of workplace democracy today ... the institution of employment, one of the most central institutions of our society, remains undemocratic.”⁷³³ For Pateman, workplace or economic democracy is an essential ingredient in any process of democratising everyday life. It is important as an end in itself insofar as it provides citizens decision-making capacity over an institution in which they spend most of their lives, and for the instrumental reason of providing a space to learn important political skills that could improve their ability to participate in other political processes.

The last wave of enthusiasm for economic democracy arose on the back of the student movements in the 1960s, influencing a generation of theorists who would propose various

⁷³⁰ Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the fall of the Old Regime*, 91.

⁷³¹ Michael Diamond and Seth Allcorn, “Surfacing Perversions of Democracy in the Workplace: A Contemporary Psychoanalytic Project,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2006) 11, 54–73, 56.

⁷³² Phillip Petit, *On the People’s Terms: A Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Although, there is now a growing body of critical literature addressing this failing in the revival of republican political discourse. For a recent elaboration of forms of domination related to the unequal distribution of economic resources see Alex Gourevitch, “Labour Republicanism and the Transformation of Work,” *Political Theory* (2013) 41 (4), 591–617. See also Michael J. Thompson, “The Two Faces of Domination in Republican Political Theory,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (2016) (forthcoming). Smith, *Democratic Innovations*, 2. The literature on participatory budgeting could also be considered a partial exception to this neglect. See, for example, Baiocchi, Heller and Silva (eds.), *Bootstrapping Democracy: Transforming Local Governance and Civil Society in Brazil*.

⁷³³ Carole Pateman, “Participatory Democracy Revisited,” *Perspectives on Politics* (2012) 10 (1), 7–19.

forms of greater participation in the workplace.⁷³⁴ The demands of the councils overlap with this broader program of participatory democracy that has since waned in popularity. Among these theorists, Robert Dahl articulated a theory of economic democracy understood as the extension of democratic principles into the economic sphere through worker owned and controlled enterprises.⁷³⁵ As Dahl argues, “if democracy is justified in governing the state, then it is also justified in governing economic enterprises. What is more, if it cannot be justified in governing economic enterprises, we do not quite see how it can be justified in governing the state.”⁷³⁶ For Dahl, economic democracy is understood as a moral right of self-government in terms of workers participating in fundamental decisions that affect their lives.⁷³⁷ There are now indications following the global economic crisis and increased focus on rising economic inequalities (i.e. Occupy Wall Street) that questions of economic democracy may be experiencing another revival.⁷³⁸ Tom Malleeson’s *After Occupy: Economic Democracy for the 21st Century*, for example, argues for the implementation of formal equal decision-making power across workplaces, finance and investment institutions in order to reduce the exercise of unequal political power. But since mainstream liberal democratic theory has not seriously engaged with the historical arguments for economic democracy it has missed the conceptual possibilities for theorising democratic forms of control over workplaces and the economy.

The distinctive arguments raised by the councils’ practice of democracy in the economic domain are worth examining in closer detail. The basis of the councils’ position is informed by Marx’s analysis and critique of capitalist relations of production and wage labour. In one of his earliest formulations of the problem in *On the Jewish Question*, Marx differentiates between mere political emancipation and human emancipation.⁷³⁹ The establishment of a liberal democracy following the American Revolution (eventually) led to every adult member of society becoming equal under the law and having a share of popular sovereignty. However,

⁷³⁴ Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy*; Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*; Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*.

⁷³⁵ Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy*, 4.

⁷³⁶ Ibid., 134–135.

⁷³⁷ Ibid., 25. See also Robert Mayer, “Robert Dahl and the Right to Workplace Democracy,” *Review of Politics* (2001) 63, 221–247; Robert Dahl, “A Right to Workplace Democracy? A Response to Robert Mayer,” *Review of Politics* (2001) 63, 249–253.

⁷³⁸ See Landemore and Ferreras, “In Defense of Workplace Democracy: Towards a Justification of the Firm–State Analogy”; Richard Wolff, *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012); Ruth Yeoman, *Meaningful Work and Workplace Democracy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Malleeson, *After Occupy: Economic Democracy for the 21st Century*; Ness and Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master Ours to Own*.

⁷³⁹ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, 146–174.

the universality of the political state abstracts from the persisting economic inequalities between individuals in civil society. The modern state presupposes and depends on the institution of private property and the domination and exploitation of a certain class of citizens without sufficient economic resources to guarantee their independence and liberty. By declaring economic inequalities as immaterial for citizens' political existence, the state reaffirms these differences and reinforces such relations of domination in civil society. In place of the modern political state, Marx demands a more complete social emancipation that would destroy the basis for conflicting economic interests between citizens and overcome these forms of exploitation.

The problem of exploitation in capitalist societies can be understood partly through the operation of a system of wage labour. In *Wage Labour and Capital*, Marx analyses the systemic inequalities between labourers and capitalists in relation to employment contracts. On the face of it, an employment contract may seem like a reciprocal exchange in which a “worker sells their labour-power to the capitalist in exchange for wages.”⁷⁴⁰ Yet, Marx emphasises this economic exchange rests upon an unequal social relationship between two classes of people with different levels of structural power. Capitalist relations of production require “the existence of a class which possesses nothing but the ability to work.”⁷⁴¹ In their bargaining over contracts the worker is in a position of structural disadvantage: “the worker, whose only source of income is the sale of his labour-power,” might be able to choose between different employers, but they “cannot leave the whole class of buyers.”⁷⁴² Despite a small margin of freedom, the worker is still bound by a general dependency on the class of capitalists as a whole. To be sure, capitalists are also constrained insofar as they can only increase profits through the exploitation of labour, but the consequences of a refusal of a contract are far graver for a labourer than a capitalist.

Following from Marx's analysis, the councils identified two major forms of structural domination in workers' lives.⁷⁴³ The first problem emanated from the lack of genuine control over their own work activity and the organisation of their workplaces. They had no say either in the arrangement of their own workday or in broader structural and organisational questions

⁷⁴⁰ Karl Marx, “Wage Labour and Capital,” in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 9, 197–228, 198.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 217.

⁷⁴² Ibid., 210.

⁷⁴³ See Michael J. Thompson, “A Functionalist Theory of Social Domination,” *Journal of Political Power* (2013) 6 (2), 179–199.

of the firm. In a functional sense, workers were essentially servants for their employers. By purchasing their labour power, an employer could command them for the period in which they were being paid wages. The range of duties that a worker could be expected to carry out were limited by the law, but an essential component of a workers' responsibilities within a firm was to follow their employers' orders. While conditions and circumstances varied across workplaces and some workers would have suffered more than others, all were subject to the discretionary powers of their employers. The councils responded to this challenge by elaborating new forms of "self-managed communities" and democratic control by workers over basic organisational questions of the workplace.⁷⁴⁴ The workers' councils were organised through workplaces and elected delegates based on the composition of large enterprises. One of their primary roles was to allow workers to manage and control their workplaces. Although the councils encountered mixed results in their implementation of workers' control, this was one of the central demands of the council movement.

In addition to demanding democratic authority at the level of the organisation, the councils identified a second source of potential domination based on the system of wage labour. Däumig argued that this related to the workers' lack of control over productive assets and the resulting necessity of "workers forced to sell their labor to capital in order to survive."⁷⁴⁵ In *Introduction to Political Economy*, Rosa Luxemburg outlined a Marxist critique of the structural domination that exists in the labour market due to economic inequalities and the system of wage labour. Due to the "separation of labour-power from the means of production" the worker has no commodity to bring to the marketplace to exchange, nothing that is, "but to bring himself to market as a commodity, i.e. to bring his own labour-power."⁷⁴⁶ When productive assets are owned by a narrow elite there is no genuine choice for a worker. They are compelled to sell their labour to capitalists in exchange for a wage to sustain themselves while the capitalists retain the surplus value of their labour as profit. While there may be some competition between employers, workers face serious cultural and economic pressure to get a job and have significantly less bargaining power than employers. Luxemburg argues that this situation represents one of structural domination in which individually uncoordinated, cumulative but unintentional actions lead to a condition of unfreedom for workers forced into selling their labour. The councils came to identify wage-labour and the

⁷⁴⁴ Däumig, "The Council Idea and Its Realization," in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 51.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁴⁶ Rosa Luxemburg, "Introduction to Political Economy," in Peter Hudis (ed.), *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg, Volume I: Economic Writings I* (London: Verso, 2013) 234.

lack of control over the means of production as a central concern in their struggle to democratise society. They required that control over productive assets be transformed to release workers from this form of domination. What set them apart from the moderate socialists of their time was their desire to swiftly implement a program of socialisation of key industries without delay. These arguments raised by the councils still provide a normative justification for the consideration of forms of economic democracy today. Although I am unable to offer a full elaboration and defence of economic democracy here, the point I wish to stress is that an extension of democratic forms of control into the economic sphere was an essential aspect of the councils' form of resistance to elite domination. The question of how to implement different forms of economic democracy today is an area that would benefit from further research to identify practical proposals for reform.

In the next section, I compare the councils' mode of democratic action with other approaches in democratic theory. I deploy the framework of the councils to address the deficiencies of two opposing poles of democratic theory: deliberative democracy and the radical democratic perspective of Jacques Rancière. The democratic actions of the councils highlight the limitations of both these perspectives and provide fresh insight into neglected aspects of democratic practices. In particular, they reveal the importance of engaging directly with the central political institutions of a state and in mobilising political collectives in order to equalise power between democratic citizens.

Deliberation and Democratic Politics

Since the deliberative turn in the 1990s, deliberative democracy has not only become the dominant approach in democratic theory, but according to John Dryzek, "the most active area of political theory in its entirety."⁷⁴⁷ Its popularity is evinced by the sheer number of sub-disciplines it has drawn into its orbit, from political science to law, development studies, policy analysis, political communications and social psychology. It has become so diffused that it is now difficult to encapsulate all of the different approaches and applications within a single definition. Yet, in one of the classic works, Joshua Cohen defined deliberative democracy as providing an account of legitimacy based on those subject to a decision having

⁷⁴⁷ John Dryzek, "Theory, Evidence and the Tasks of Deliberation," in Shawn W. Rosenberg (ed.), *Deliberation, Participation and Democracy: Can the People Govern?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 239.

the capacity and opportunity to have meaningful deliberation about its content.⁷⁴⁸ What matters for deliberative democrats is not votes or the aggregation of preferences, but a decision emerging from a process of real deliberation and debate. Despite its growth over the years, the core claims of deliberative democracy still relate to a theory of democratic legitimacy.⁷⁴⁹ The focus is on how genuine deliberation between free and equal participants can generate a legitimacy that is lacking in raw aggregative methods of decision-making. A crucial difference from the aggregative approach is that the interests of democratic agents are considered amenable and subject to transformation through dialogue and deliberation. Deliberative democracy claims the benefits of greater levels of participation, higher levels of government legitimacy and overall better decision-making as a result of the deliberative process.

Expanding on this initial definition, Gutmann and Thompson provide four key characteristics of deliberative democracy.⁷⁵⁰ The first and most important characteristic is a reason-giving requirement. Decision-makers and those involved in meaningful deliberation must give reasons for decisions based on publically available grounds of justification.⁷⁵¹ A reason cannot simply refer to an administrative rule or rely on forms of argumentation that would be unconvincing to the broader public such as the revelation of a holy text or undisclosed personal grounds. A second characteristic is that these reasons have to be expressed in such a way that they are intelligible to their addressees and not intended to coerce or manipulate them. Acts of bargaining, trade-offs and barter can take place within deliberative democracies, but they are not strictly considered part of a pure deliberative process unless justified in some way. Third, processes of deliberation must lead to a binding decision as a result of a period of free and un-coerced deliberation. Finally, this decision must be open to potential challenge in the future allowing for the adjustment of opinions due to continuing dialogue. It is essential that all potential interests affected by a decision are taken into account and that, ideally, all

⁷⁴⁸ Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy". For other classic accounts of deliberative democracy see John Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy and Political Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," in Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference*, 67–94; Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*.

⁷⁴⁹ Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 10.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1–29.

⁷⁵¹ Early critiques of deliberative theory drew attention to the rigid, rational and pure requirements of dialogue. Deliberative democrats responded by incorporating a broader range of forms of communication into what was considered as acceptable forms of deliberation. See Jane Mansbridge, "Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System," in Stephen Macedo (ed.), *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 39–48.

opinions be included. In earlier versions of the theory, particularly those associated with Jürgen Habermas, participants reaching consensus was thought to be a primary goal of the activity of deliberation. However, a greater appreciation of pluralism and deep difference has led most contemporary approaches to consider consensus no longer as an essential end point of deliberation.⁷⁵²

There have been a number of stages in the development of the discourse of deliberative democracy since its emergence in the early 1990s. The first statements of the theory tended to focus on establishing the normative criteria according to which deliberative democracy could be defended against reasonable philosophical objections. Then, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, theorists began to focus on empirical applications of the theory that tested its normative claims in practice and investigated how deliberation could be embodied in specific institutional contexts.⁷⁵³ As a result of this “practical” or “institutional” turn in deliberative democracy, studies examined how deliberation functioned in real world situations involving difficult policy questions and multiple actors negotiating complex environments.⁷⁵⁴ These works were less concerned about normative justifications for deliberative democracy and more interested in showing how these theories could be applied in practice. Some of these works focused on particular forums or institutions such as “mini-publics,” composed of a small number of citizens selected to take part in a controlled deliberative environment on a select issue. The most recent turn in deliberative democracy has been towards a focus on “deliberative systems” which analyses the operation of a variety of interrelated deliberative activities within a larger system. In the most definitive statement of this new approach set out in *Deliberative Systems*, an impressive number of deliberative theorists argue that deliberative democracy is best conceived as operating across multiple sites and within a variety of institutions which are interconnected to form a complex whole.⁷⁵⁵ This acknowledges that a number of different activities from everyday speech to parliamentary institutions accomplish political work in furthering the aims of a deliberative system.

⁷⁵² John Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 15.

⁷⁵³ Simone Chambers, “Deliberative Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* (2003) 6, 307–326.

⁷⁵⁴ John Parkinson, *Deliberating in the Real World: Problems of Legitimacy in Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷⁵⁵ Jane Mansbridge and John Parkinson (eds.), *Deliberative Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Most theorists of deliberative democracy view it as an approach to democracy within the framework of liberal constitutionalism, although there are some notable dissenting voices who continue to hold deliberative discourse at arms' length from this paradigm.⁷⁵⁶ Perhaps the most well-known design of deliberative democracy is Habermas' two-track model in which one level of deliberation is carried out in the public sphere and another in the empowered realm of the state legislature.⁷⁵⁷ Opinions formulated in the deliberation of the informal public sphere are transmitted to the legislature through elections and general public opinion. The parliament is then able to form rules and regulations through legislation and administration, which should bear a resemblance to the informal deliberation of the broader public. Nonetheless, deliberative democrats can range from elite deliberative theorists, who are concerned with better dialogue between elite political actors, to radical direct deliberative theorists, who prefer that everyone affected by a decision should genuinely have a voice in how this decision is made.⁷⁵⁸ It is therefore difficult to say that deliberative theory is beholden to one particular ideology or political persuasion.

However, there is a basic shared standpoint from which deliberative democrats interrogate democratic questions. Their focus is on ensuring the legitimacy of decision-making through authentic dialogue and debate. It is this perspective that I worry has come to dominate discussions of democracy at the expense of other significant issues.⁷⁵⁹ This is not to deny the importance of democratic legitimacy or to criticise prominent accounts of how it has been formulated within deliberative theory. Rather, it is important to question whether deliberation should be considered *the* perspective from which to interrogate democratic politics. In "Deliberation, and What Else?" Michael Walzer points to a number of other valuable activities that are undertaken in democracies aside from deliberating: education, organisation, mobilisation, fund-raising and scut-work, among others.⁷⁶⁰ Deliberation figures in a democratic political process that is predominantly non-deliberative in nature. Democratic activity can often result from people organising together to act more effectively in pursuing

⁷⁵⁶ John Bohman, "The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* (1998) 6 (4), 400–425. For a dissenting opinion see Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance*.

⁷⁵⁷ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*.

⁷⁵⁸ Ethan J. Leib, "Can Direct Democracy Be Made Deliberative?" *Buffalo Law Revue* (2006–2007) 54, 903–925; Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel, "Directly Deliberative Polyarchy," *European Law Journal* (1997) 3 (4), 313–342.

⁷⁵⁹ Guttman and Thompson rightly note that "[n]o subject has been more discussed in political theory in the last two decades than deliberative democracy." Guttman and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, vii.

⁷⁶⁰ Michael Walzer, "Deliberation, and What Else?" in Michael Walzer and David Miller (eds.), *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 134–146.

their political objectives rather than in the quiet, reflective weighting of evidence and choosing of the best alternative. Yet, the problem is not simply that we have paid insufficient attention to other democratic activities, but that deliberation and legitimacy have become the most important values against which we judge democratic institutions and the lens through which we understand politics.

Liberal representative democracy is increasingly in crisis and deliberative democracy sees itself to one degree or another as offering a solution.⁷⁶¹ As I outlined in the introduction of the thesis, representative institutions appear unable to prevent falling rates of participation and the rising elite dominance of political life. Deliberative theorists cast deliberation as a potential source of rejuvenation of democracy and a panacea for the current separation of governments from their citizens. Framed in these terms, deliberative democracy suffers from a theoretical overstretch concerning what democratic problems can genuinely be solved through a greater attention to deliberation. This can be understood in two distinct ways. Firstly, it relates to the diagnostic question of whether a “deliberative deficit” could be said to be among the most important political problems of our era. Secondly, it raises questions over whether deliberation promises too much in terms of its remedial qualities for troubled democracies. The overall concern is that a narrow emphasis on deliberation has crowded out other aspects of politics to the detriment of our understanding of democratic practices. In the following, I contrast deliberative democracy with the democratic practices of the councils. I locate my criticisms of the deliberative approach within the radical democratic camp of critics such as Iris Marion Young, Lynn Sanders and Ian Shapiro who have questioned deliberative democracy’s egalitarian and democratic credentials.⁷⁶² The democratic actions of the councils assist in revealing the limitations of the deliberative approach and help us to raise other valuable questions and perspectives.

Guttmann and Thompson claim that the purpose of deliberative democracy arises due to “the need for ongoing discussion of moral disagreement in everyday political life.”⁷⁶³ In the face

⁷⁶¹ Stephen Elstub and Peter McLaverty (eds.), *Deliberative Democracy: Issues and Cases* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) 1.

⁷⁶² Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Young, “Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy”; Lynn Sanders, “Against Deliberation,” *Political Theory* (1997) 35 (3), 347–377; Ian Shapiro, “Enough of Deliberation: Politics is about Interest and Power,” in Macedo (ed.), *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, 28–38. For a response to these critics see Alison Kadlec and Will Friedman, “Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Power,” *Journal of Public Deliberation* (2007) 3 (1), Article 8.

⁷⁶³ Guttmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, 11.

of seemingly intractable moral conflicts, deliberation responds by “encouraging citizens to take a broader perspective” and “to recognize the moral merit in their opponent’s claims.”⁷⁶⁴ The problem of politics, as framed by Guttman and Thompson, concerns moral disagreement between citizens over contentious policy issues and how these could be transformed through deliberation. Ian Shapiro has persuasively argued that this perspective does not adequately acknowledge the extent to which political conflict is shaped primarily by unequal power between citizens and the clashing of different interests.⁷⁶⁵ For Guttman and Thompson, deliberation aims to reduce disagreement and promote accommodation between conflicting parties. But this perspective presupposes that disagreements in politics are primarily over moral matters on which one’s views can be altered rather than over mutually incompatible conceptions of democratic governance. There is little room for compromise or accommodation between a minimalist model of elite rule and a participatory vision of a democratic society. Deliberative theorists have demonstrated that there is much benefit that can be gained in attempting to submit moral disagreements to rational deliberation. However, it is a much broader and more contentious claim whether deliberation of the sort advocated would provide an adequate resolution to major political conflicts in contemporary democracies.

Consider the challenges currently faced by democratic states: rising levels of economic inequalities, governments dominated by special interests and private lobby groups, a dismantling of the welfare state by powerful corporations on the advance, and supranational governance structures run by unaccountable technocratic elites. It is difficult to see which of these problems could be adequately addressed through the establishment of a deliberative forum or a higher quality of debate in current discussions. One of the most frequently raised objections to processes of deliberation is that it would be ineffective or undermined in societies with large inequalities in resources and power between citizens. A significant limitation of deliberation is that the very terms of the debate would be framed by powerful interests with sufficient political influence to control the process. Even if certain aspects of power imbalances could be redressed through institutional design, Iris Marion Young argues that those deliberating would still be embedded in dominant hegemonic discourse, “which

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁵ Shapiro, “Enough of deliberation: politics is about interest and power,” in Macedo (ed.), *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, 29.

itself is a complex product of structural inequality.”⁷⁶⁶ To claim that the formal inclusion of all voices in a deliberative process would guarantee an equal playing field ignores the structural bias in favour of affluent and networked parties. An excessive focus on deliberation in this context conceals the ongoing political conflict over power and resources and the ability of elites to frame the common interest to suit their own particular purposes.

One question to consider is what perspective would deliberative democracy bring to bear on the council movements in Russia and Germany. Would this draw attention to significant aspects of the councils or limit our understanding of them by failing to attend to their crucial dimensions? Certainly, the councils could be described as deliberative forums that permitted discussion and debate of political ideas and fostered interaction and mutual awareness between their members. In council deliberations, delegates gave reasons for pursuing particular courses of action, educated one another and decided on collective action based on these accounts. But would the councils still be worth examining today had they only focussed their energies on creating more ideal speech situations within their assemblies and encouraging more debate with their adversaries? Moreover, was a crucial deficiency of the councils that they did not seek a mutually acceptable way of resolving their moral disagreements with the bourgeoisie and state bureaucracy?

I contend that the councils were confronted with more immediate problems relating to other nondeliberative parts of the political process and that it was the councils’ emphasis on these aspects that are of importance for contemporary politics. For the councils, the most crucial task was the organisational question of mobilising opposition forces against the institutional hierarchies of the old regime. What gave the councils their decisive influence was not the sophistication or eloquence of their arguments but the legitimacy generated through the mobilisation of large segments of the population in support of a transformative democratic program with the political power to enforce it. Democratic politics for the councils involved the ongoing challenge to hierarchies that continually threatened to reassert themselves. It required an appreciation of the perspective, enunciated by council delegate Richard Müller, that “all political questions remain, in the end, questions of power.”⁷⁶⁷ The challenge of restraining elites who threaten to dismantle democratic controls cannot be met by introducing

⁷⁶⁶ Young, “Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy,” 683.

⁷⁶⁷ Müller, “Report by the Executive Council of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils of Great Berlin,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 39.

greater levels of deliberation within democratic institutions. The framing of the central political questions in terms of reaching a mutually amenable agreement was a strategy of the elites to create parliamentary institutions that they could then dominate.

At certain points in the political process, citizens seeking “fair terms of cooperation” in which to “reason together” is an important goal, but so too are actions that achieve substantive results in implementing democratic forms of control.⁷⁶⁸ A narrow focus on how decisions are made and how citizens communicate with each other risks missing what is, from the council delegates’ perspective, the substantive activity of politics, i.e., collective action that challenges consolidated hierarchies and equalises power between citizens. Such issues are simply not able to be addressed within the framework of procedural reforms to decision-making. An examination of the history of the councils provides a revealing example of the limitations of the deliberative perspective and the necessity of broadening the study of democratic practices to a variety of other approaches.

Jacques Rancière and Institutional Politics

I now turn from the mainstream of democratic theory to the margins in order to consider radical democratic perspectives. At first glance, the approach of radical democrats appears more commensurable with that of the councils. Radical democratic theorists are more attentive to the agonistic dimensions of democratic politics and celebrate practices of resistance and contestation as integral parts of the democratic process. They confront the oppressive and disciplinary nature of political regimes and examine the nuanced forms of power that operate within political institutions. I will examine the democratic politics of Jacques Rancière as an influential approach within the radical democratic camp. While the councils provide a different perspective on democratic politics to the mainstream approach of deliberative democracy, they also demonstrate the limitations of Rancière’s political vision.

In contrast to most deliberative democratic theorists, Rancière focuses on the margins of traditional concerns of politics. He analyses processes that occur at the periphery of the central institutions of political life: new political movements, mobilisations and protests that

⁷⁶⁸ Guttmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, 3.

break with the status quo.⁷⁶⁹ Rancière shares with other radical democrats a focus on momentary and disruptive acts that challenge established hierarchies and institutions.⁷⁷⁰ This perspective leads to a vision of politics as irruptive, episodic and essentially non-institutionalisable. In this section, I interrogate Rancière's aversion to institutionalised forms of political struggle and contrast this with the interventionist approach of the councils. The attention Rancière pays to the moments of rupture in politics tends to overshadow the ongoing egalitarian political struggles of groups once they are recognised within existing democratic societies and makes it difficult to consider partial cases of those recognised in marginal or inconsequential forms.

Against Rancière's suspicion of all forms of institutional politics, council delegates sought to transform institutions through opening them to democratic forms of control. The history of the councils reveals the importance of an engagement with public institutions for democratic politics and political freedom. From the councils, we acquire a more useful and convincing account of the dynamics of institutional struggle and its relationship to democratic action. They provide an illustrative example of the organisation of democratic forces that challenge the domination of elites and assert democratic control over the central institutions and forces within society.

Rancière's interventions into debates concerning the meaning of democracy are now well known: democracy, for Rancière, is neither a political regime nor a form of social life – it designates the singular rupture of a social order by the staging of a political disagreement over the distribution of parts and roles within society.⁷⁷¹ This interruption is the assertion of an axiom of equality by a new political subject, a “part of those without part,” who struggles against its exclusion. This excluded subject undermines the logic of the regime of the visible and throws the established principles of rulership and political division back into contingency. Politics properly understood is always democratic as it involves the creation of a political

⁷⁶⁹ It is not surprising that some of the most fruitful applications of Rancière's work have been to political struggles concerning immigrants, refugees and stateless persons. See Todd May, *Contemporary Political Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

⁷⁷⁰ See also Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” in Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*; Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁷⁷¹ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 99.

dispute that acts as a mode of subjectification for an excluded subject and reconfigures a particular field of experience according to a principle of equality.

The past two decades have witnessed a substantial exploration of the implications of Rancière's engagement with political theory and its possible application to contemporary political movements.⁷⁷² A number of criticisms of Rancière have emerged, the two most important of which assist in framing my own discussion. The most oft-heard criticism of Rancière is that his understanding of politics is too ephemeral, fleeting and sporadic to offer the resources required for supporting the organisation and sustenance of long-term oppositional political movements.⁷⁷³ There is little sense in Rancière's work of an acknowledgement of the incremental nature of political mobilisation beyond the moment of rupture or how political victories could be held and built upon. Politics happens "very little," Rancière explains; it is destined to only momentary occurrences, after which new political subjects are incorporated into the existing "police" order. On this reading, Rancière is susceptible to a similar charge levelled at Sheldon Wolin's concept of a "fugitive democracy," which conceives of democracy not as a form of government but as the eruption of a political experience that is intermittent, rare and destined to only temporary existence.⁷⁷⁴ The problem with this tragic vision of politics that could be attributed to Rancière is that it necessarily excludes the possibility of more enduring and sustainable forms of egalitarian political practice.⁷⁷⁵ Secondly, Rancière is accused of establishing a new dualism between his concepts of politics and the police that maintains the purity of political resistance as a permanent outside to any police order.⁷⁷⁶ Of all Rancière's texts it is perhaps *Disagreement* that remains

⁷⁷² See for example Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (eds.), *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) 95–194; Jean-Philippe Deranty (ed.), *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (London: Acumen, 2010) 1–14, 57–94; Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011) 1–43, 73–94, 129–162, 238–251; May, *Contemporary Political Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action*.

⁷⁷³ Peter Hallward, "Staging Equality: Rancière's Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equality," in Rockhill and Watts (eds.), *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, 140–157, 155–157; Jackie Clarke "Rancière, Politics and the Social Question," in Oliver Davis (ed.), *Rancière Now: Current Perspectives on Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013); Alberto Toscano, "Anti-Sociology and its Limits," in Bowman and Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, 217–237.

⁷⁷⁴ Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," in Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*.

⁷⁷⁵ Jodi Dean, "Politics without Politics," *Parallax* (2009) 15 (3), 20–36, 30.

⁷⁷⁶ This would be in spite of Rancière's own acknowledgement of the importance of avoiding this impasse. See Bruno Bosteels, "Rancière's Leftism, Or, Politics and its Discontents," in Rockhill and Watts (eds.), *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, 158–175, 167–171; Slavoj Žižek, "The Lesson of Rancière," in Gabriel Rockhill (ed.), *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2005) 69–79.

See also Oliver Marchart "The Second Return of the Political: Democracy and the Syllogism of Equality," in Bowman and Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, 129–147.

most vulnerable to falling into this Manichean schema of purified oppositions resolved of their internal contradictions and ambiguities.⁷⁷⁷ It is here where Jodi Dean, in her polemic against Rancière, sees “a kind of hysterical pure politics of resistance,” which avoids the messy engagement with the historical entwinement of power and the people within political conflicts.⁷⁷⁸

How much traction these criticisms have on Rancière’s work depends in part on how sympathetically one reads him. In addition to Rancière’s own responses to these criticisms,⁷⁷⁹ a number of his supporters have attempted to explore some of the complexities of his work that have evaded the narrow readings of his critics. Most notably, Samuel Chambers has devoted considerable effort to uncovering the nuances of a “politics of the police” within Rancière’s writings. Such an impure politics reveals the entanglement of politics within police orders and instigates the necessary task of critiquing and transforming them.⁷⁸⁰ Aletta Norval, on the other hand, seeks to bridge the divide between the initial articulation of a democratic demand and the reconfiguration of an existing order by re-examining the role of practices of inscription in Rancière’s work.⁷⁸¹ Drawing from Rancière’s historical rather than theoretical writings, Norval elucidates the power of exemplars, exploring how moments of rupture can become institutionalised and inscribed into a new order. While Chambers and Norval both offer subtle and nuanced readings of Rancière that extend our understanding of his engagement with democratic politics, the limitation of these approaches lies in an aspect readily admitted by both authors: how underdeveloped such themes are in Rancière’s own

⁷⁷⁷ The most unsympathetic of Rancière’s critics draw heavily from *Disagreement* rather than his more historical works. It is worth mentioning that *Disagreement* is not typical of Rancière’s output and as a general “theory” of politics is not representative of his approach. It was written after a request to draw out some of the more general implications of his historical work undertaken throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Rancière is critical of the way exercises in political theory override instances where political actors practiced equality as a historical reality.

⁷⁷⁸ Dean, “Politics without Politics,” 30.

⁷⁷⁹ In relation to the first criticism Rancière argues “I am not a thinker of the event, of the upsurge, but rather of emancipation as something with its own tradition, with a history that isn’t just made up of great striking deeds, but also of the ongoing effort to create forms of the common different from the ones on offer from the state, the democratic consensus, and so on.” Jacques Rancière, “Democracies against Democracy: An Interview with Eric Hazan,” in Giorgio Agamben (ed.), *Democracy in which State?* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2011) 79–80. In relation to the second criticism, Rancière replies: “If the distinction between politics and the police can be useful, it is not to allow us to say: politics is on this side, police is on the opposite side. It is to allow us to understand the form of their intertwinement.” See also Jacques Rancière, “The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions,” in Rockhill and Watts (eds.), *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, 273–288; Jacques Rancière, “The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics,” in Bowman and Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, 1–17; Jacques Rancière, “Against an Ebbing Tide: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” in Bowman and Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, 238–251.

⁷⁸⁰ Samuel A. Chambers “The Politics of the Police,” in Bowman and Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, 18–43; Samuel A. Chambers, “Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (2011) 10 (3), 303–326.

⁷⁸¹ Norval, “‘Writing a Name in the Sky’: Rancière, Cavell, and the Possibility of Egalitarian Inscription”.

writings. Rancière clearly gestures towards broader processes of political transformation through his discussion of the reconfiguration of a given order. For instance, processes of subjectification are said to “redefine a field of experience,” while democracy is seen as that which “modifies the regime of the visible.”⁷⁸² He also seems to suggest that such inscriptions within an existing order would then be available for future struggles.⁷⁸³ It would be difficult for his critics to assert that there is not therefore some enduring element of political action. But the nature and outcomes of such processes of transformation often fall from Rancière’s field of vision. Similarly, Rancière frequently remarks on the impurity of politics and its emergence through the confrontation of a logic of equality with a police order. However, this does not prevent him from defining them in *Disagreement* as two distinct logics or from describing them largely in oppositional terms.

A possible response to some of the more severe critics of Rancière is to direct attention to his historical writings where his approach has much in common with Arendt’s use of historical examples.⁷⁸⁴ Rancière deploys specific historical examples of individuals and groups who had concrete conceptions of their own emancipation beyond how these were represented in the works of theorists and philosophers.⁷⁸⁵ Archival texts are of great importance to Rancière because they provide access to the actual writings of working-class actors whose voices can counter dominant narratives within political theory. Rather than outlining a general theory of politics as such, Rancière engages in his historical works with neglected figures and texts, aiming to recapture forgotten political practices. By allowing workers to speak of their own desires, Rancière could even be said to go further than Arendt in returning to these forgotten political episodes, since Arendt still frames (and arguably distorts) these experiences from the interpretive position of her political theory. One prominent example Rancière utilises in *The Nights of Labour* is the joiner and floor-layer, Gabriel Gauny, who complicates Marxist

⁷⁸² Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 99.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷⁸⁴ While on this point there is an overlap between these two thinkers’ works, it is important not to confuse or amalgamate their projects. For Rancière’s critique of Arendt see Jacques Rancière, “The Ethical Turn in Politics and Aesthetics,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 201. For a view of Rancière and Arendt as offering complementary accounts of politics see James D. Ingram, “The Subject of the Politics of Recognition: Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière,” in Georg Bertram, Robin Celikates, Christoph Laudou, and David Lauer (eds.), *Socialité et reconnaissance. Grammaires de l’humain* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 2006) 239. For a view of the critical differences between their works see Andrew Schaap, “Enacting the Right to have Rights: Jacques Rancière’s critique of Hannah Arendt,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (2011) 10 (1), 22–45.

⁷⁸⁵ Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-century France*; Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Jacques Rancière, *Staging the People: The Philosopher and his Double* (London: Verso, 2011); Jacques Rancière, *The Intellectual and his People: Staging the People Volume 2* (London: Verso, 2012).

accounts of working-class culture by living as a manual labourer who philosophised in his time away from work.⁷⁸⁶ Similarly, Rancière recounts the story of Joseph Jacotot to serve as an example of an emancipatory form of pedagogy that proceeded on the basis of a radical equality of intelligence between thinking beings.⁷⁸⁷ It is difficult for Rancière's critics to incorporate these historical examples within the same charge of a desire for a purified form of politics. However, it is worth noting that the majority of examples Rancière deploys are individuals, whereas the focus of my inquiry in this thesis is institutional politics.

The reason for rehearsing these familiar criticisms of Rancière is that they set the stage for the principal task of a critical interrogation of the role of institutions within his work. If politics were only episodic and fleeting then it would be unnecessary and fruitless for it to be institutionalised. Such an undertaking would be similarly futile if political action consisted solely in modes of resistance that were opposed to any organisational form. As the above discussion demonstrates, it can be easy to read Rancière in just this way. There is a tendency in his work to emphasise the sporadic and eruptive moments of politics and to view forms of institutionalisation and reform as oppressive, hierarchical and part of a police logic.⁷⁸⁸ This is most notable in Rancière's claim that "democracy cannot consist in a set of institutions," or in the similar assertion that the "power of the people ... can never be institutionalized."⁷⁸⁹ In one sense, given the definitional manoeuvres Rancière makes, such an incompatibility should not be surprising. If democracy is defined as the moment of "a singular disruption of this order of distribution of bodies" then it certainly couldn't also be a regime or a form of government.⁷⁹⁰ Rancière also claims that politics involves a repartitioning of political space and a calling into question of the boundaries of the political. For such a politics that always occurs, "out of place," as Rancière says, it is understandable that this would not frequently unfold within traditional institutions of power.⁷⁹¹

⁷⁸⁶ Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-century France*, 3–136.

⁷⁸⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) 50.

⁷⁸⁸ Ella Myers, "Presupposing Equality: the Trouble with Rancière's Axiomatic Approach," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (2016) 42 (1), 45–69; Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) 176–185.

⁷⁸⁹ Jacques Rancière, "Does Democracy Mean Something?" in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010) 54; Todd May et al., "Democracy, Anarchism and Radical Politics Today: An Interview with Jacques Rancière," *Anarchist Studies* (2008) 16 (2), 173–185, 173.

⁷⁹⁰ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 99.

⁷⁹¹ Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus," in Bowman and Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, 4.

Yet, he appears at times to go one step further towards a generalised aversion to all institutions and a profound scepticism of their role in political struggle. Institutions are most commonly depicted in Rancière's work as mechanisms of hierarchy and domination. From "national states" as well as "inter-state power," to "governments, of the left as well as right," institutional politics is conceived of as applying everywhere "the same programme of systematic destruction of public services."⁷⁹² Parliaments, representative bodies or indeed any form of democratic government is "organized by the play of oligarchies."⁷⁹³ Similarly, political parties and financial interests are part of a collusion "between a small oligarchy of financiers and politicians."⁷⁹⁴ In sum, institutions are associated with the police activity of partitioning the sensible into functions and roles. This is the task of any "constitutional form" or "mode of public life," which is achieved through its constitution, laws, public offices and social mores, all of which tame the excesses of politics. The ordinary practices and procedures of institutional politics form part of such an oppressive and largely unequal order. Rancière generally displays a disinterest in institutions as spaces of political struggle. In his own terms, "democracy is always beneath and beyond these forms."⁷⁹⁵ Politics is either seen as a praxis of political collectives, or, in more abstract terms, as the transformation of symbolic orders, redistribution of boundaries and the creation of new fields of visibility.⁷⁹⁶ It is impossible that such forms of collective action could ever be embodied in more ongoing and permanent structures because "the community of equals can never achieve substantial form as a social institution."⁷⁹⁷ The problem with such a totalising view is that it fails to capture the nuances of forms of contestation that occur within institutions and denies that they can play any role in advancing egalitarian struggles.

However, in spite of Rancière's largely hostile view of institutions, there is a minor current in his work where he provides a different perspective on the possibilities of institutional struggle. These brief comments are located mainly in his interviews where perhaps the proximity to empirical events or the opportunity to step away from the schema of his theoretical work produces a different account of institutional politics. We should take seriously Rancière's claim that he can be differentiated from radical political thinkers such as

⁷⁹² Jacques Rancière, "Democracy is not a Form of State," interview available at <https://hiredknives.wordpress.com/2012/01/21/jacques-ranciere-interview-democracy-is-not-t/>

⁷⁹³ Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2009) 52.

⁷⁹⁴ Rancière, "Democracy is not a Form of State".

⁷⁹⁵ Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 71.

⁷⁹⁶ Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus," in Bowman and Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, 6.

⁷⁹⁷ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2006) 84.

Badiou and Žižek based on his refusal to completely dismiss the realm of institutional politics. Speaking of the ability of political actors to intervene in political processes Rancière maintains:

This is why, against the Marxist opposition of real and formal democracy, I emphasized the part played by all the inscriptions of the democratic process in the texts of the constitutions, the institutions of the states, the apparatuses of public opinion, the mainstream forms of enunciation.⁷⁹⁸

In referring to democracy's displacement of established identities and creation of new political subjects, Rancière claims that their appearance will "have an effect on the institutional mechanisms of politics."⁷⁹⁹ He states that such political interventions "produce inscriptions of equality" which "are in no way oblivious to elected assemblies, institutional guarantees of freedom of speech and expression, state control mechanisms."⁸⁰⁰ There are certain points in his work where he sees the transformation of a state institution as the object of a political struggle.⁸⁰¹ For example, in an interview with Todd May he argues that the state is a terrain of struggle, which "produces effects of the redefinition of rights and the transformation of institutions."⁸⁰² These moments are most pronounced when he addresses the topic of social and political movements. Although Rancière's main line of argument is that the power of the people "can never be institutionalized" and can only be "practiced, enacted by political collectives," he goes on to explain that "these subjects intervene in places other than those of executive and representative power (the street, workplace, school, etc.) ... Therefore there is indeed an institutional inscription of the 'power of the people.'"⁸⁰³ Rancière focuses here on the possibility of the development of alternative institutions, ones that are not bound to a state logic and that can take part in political interventions. Based on this brief sketch one could imagine social centres, alternative schooling systems and perhaps democratic councils being included among these alternative institutional forms. Elsewhere, Rancière highlights the necessity that such autonomous forces be developed independently of state and representative systems, although not completely oblivious to their power and

⁷⁹⁸ Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus," in Bowman and Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, 6.

⁷⁹⁹ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 100.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid., 100–101.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., 52, 100; Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, 86–91; Todd May et al., "Democracy, Anarchism and Radical Politics Today: An Interview with Jacques Rancière".

⁸⁰² Todd May et al., "Democracy, Anarchism and Radical Politics Today: An Interview with Jacques Rancière," 183.

⁸⁰³ Ibid., 173.

effects.⁸⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Rancière's account remains limited. He does not do enough to flesh out the possibilities of what forms of institutions are useful or explain the different roles such institutions would be expected to play in confrontations with the state. When given the opportunity he fails to give convincing formulations beyond the usual post-structuralist platitudes of experimenting with "new forms of thinking and acting."⁸⁰⁵ Nor does Rancière have a particularly convincing account of how institutions are integrated into processes of political transformation. As Ella Myers has argued, when Rancière discusses institutions he tends to conceive of them as objective "artefacts" or "texts" that can be challenged and reinscribed, but not as part of the dynamic of everyday political life.⁸⁰⁶ There are thus serious limitations of Rancière's political theory if it is to be used in service of the creation and development of the egalitarian politics that his work implores.

⁸⁰⁴ Rancière, "Democracy is Not a Form of State".

⁸⁰⁵ See for example Todd May et al. "Democracy, Anarchism and Radical Politics Today: An Interview with Jacques Rancière," 173. For this criticism of post-structuralist theories generally see Paul Patton, "Rancière's Utopian Politics," in Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross (eds.), *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality* (London: Continuum, 2012) 129–145, 140.

⁸⁰⁶ Myers, "Presupposing Equality: the Trouble with Rancière's Axiomatic Approach".

Beyond the Councils

Hannah Arendt's distinctive argument for a council democracy sets her apart from mainstream democratic theory. Her writings on the councils defy conventional thinking on democracy and pose a radical challenge to contemporary democratic regimes. Against the dominant liberal interpretation of her thought, I have criticised the view of her councils as either a corrective or supplement to traditional liberal parliamentary institutions. I contend that at several key moments in her texts, Arendt envisaged the transformation of liberal democratic nation-states into federal council states. Turning to the neglected institutional dimensions of her work, I excavated the origins of the council concept in Arendt's thought and demonstrated its importance as a guiding ideal for the possibilities of modern politics. The councils are the embodiment of Arendt's political value of political freedom and should be interpreted alongside political action and judgment as a central concept in her work. As a result of this renewed attention to the position of the councils, I offered a significant reinterpretation of her political theory as situated in the empowered and participatory democratic tradition of Rosa Luxemburg.

In this thesis, I deployed the political perspective of Hannah Arendt's council democracy as the critical lens through which to interrogate fundamental questions about democracy. Undertaking this task necessitated arguing with and against Arendt in several important respects. On the one hand, Arendt offers perceptive insights into our current democratic malaise. She highlights the tendency of democratic regimes to systematically disempower their citizens and maintain decision-making power in a narrow circle of elites. Her criticisms call into question a number of the central pillars of liberal democracy such as the role of political parties, the operation of parliamentary institutions and the overall framework of the sovereign nation-state. She raises the possibility of the need for broad systemic change to the framework of current democratic institutions in order to better actualise democracy's central values of freedom, self-government and political equality. In this respect, Arendt continues to offer valuable guidance for critical projects aimed at revealing the weaknesses and shortcomings of contemporary democratic regimes.

Arendt also advances an alternative set of political principles through which to conceptualise the possible transformation of present institutions. In this way, her writings enrich our political imagination with new perspectives on democratic politics. She is attentive to the loss of genuine practices of self-government in contemporary regimes and seeks to rehabilitate a more active and positive conception of political freedom beyond the mere protection of negative rights and civil liberties. She mourns the loss of empowered political spaces in which citizens could engage in deliberation and decision-making. Her arguments seek to expand the boundaries of political space beyond the narrow confines of elite parliamentary politics. Arendt's perspective multiplies the possibilities of political action through the institutionalisation of more direct and immediate forms of participation in council institutions. Her decentralised federal model of the organisation of political power is opposed to the more centralised visions that have characterised parliamentary regimes and the modern nation-state. Arendt's principles are a prescient and timely reminder that liberal democracy does not exhaust the possibilities of democratic government.

On the other hand, Arendt's representation of the councils also proves limiting and distorting in certain key respects. She mischaracterises the structure and actions of the councils by interpreting them through her own political categories and distinctions. I showed that she seeks to imprint a fundamental division between the political and economic on to the council form. Against Arendt, I sought to uncover the ways in which the councils utilised a political strategy of intervention in workplaces in order to transform their economic structure through the introduction of democratic forms of organisation. Beginning from Arendtian insights into the possibilities of the council form, I returned to the historical actions of the council delegates, which eventually led to distinctly non-Arendtian conclusions. However, the path by which these results were obtained was not one with which Arendt would have entirely disagreed. I attempted to retrieve the partially forgotten democratic practices of the councils in order to reveal what resources they made available for contemporary politics. I suggested that the councils are important not simply as a footnote in Arendt scholarship, but as an important historical period in which political actors crafted novel forms of political action and institutions that deserve renewed attention and evaluation.

I proposed that we could turn to the councils not for a working institutional model for the present, but as exemplary of a certain mode of democratic action. This involves a recognition that the councils do not provide sufficient answers to the problem of adequate institutional

arrangements for a democratic socialist polity. Neither the councils nor any other past institutional form present a ready-made alternative that could replace current representative structures or guarantee a more substantive realisation of democratic values. Although the councils are generally ignored in mainstream democratic thought, they still occupy a privileged position in certain minority strands of socialist discourse. To supporters of council institutions, I believe my analysis should serve as a disenchantment of the councils and other similar utopian schemes that would stand in as placeholders for a fully emancipated post-capitalist society. The exigencies of contemporary politics necessitate that we go beyond the councils to experiment with new forms of democratic practices and institutions that are adequate to present political struggles. However, this does not mean that the councils are only of mere historical interest. The ways in which council delegates mobilised political collectives and contested hierarchies of power still remains an important political example from which much can be learnt.

I conclude by reflecting on two general implications that follow from my analysis of the councils. First, I offer some concluding reflections on democracy. I have drawn attention to the deep contests over the concept of democracy in the era of the councils, disagreements that continue to this day. We are accustomed to considering democracy as an institutional arrangement of competitive elections in which citizens select responsive and accountable political leaders.⁸⁰⁷ I have contended that the councils' understanding of democracy embodied a distinctive class element in which democracy referred implicitly to the workers or the lower strata of society in opposition to the elite class.⁸⁰⁸ One of the motivations of this thesis has been to revive this class-conscious understanding of democratic practices for contemporary politics.⁸⁰⁹

Drawing from the political struggles of the councils, I will briefly expand upon my substantive account of democratic practices as those which equalise power relations between democratic citizens and resist the elite domination of political life. First, this view of democratic practices involves a more demanding definition than traditional liberal conceptions because it requires that equal power in decision-making should be enhanced in

⁸⁰⁷ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 267.

⁸⁰⁸ Kolonitskii, "'Democracy' in the Political Consciousness of the February Revolution," in Wade (ed.), *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches*, 75.

⁸⁰⁹ For a similar project see Hanson, "Democracy," in Ball, Farr and Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, 68–89.

the political sphere and extended to other domains of society. This expansion of the domain of democratic politics attempts to overcome the liberal separation of the public and private that protects a system of private property and an unlimited right of wealth accumulation.⁸¹⁰ Such a separation has always been a cornerstone of the liberal rather than the democratic tradition of political thought. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these two ideologies found a temporary, although uneasy and perhaps disintegrating, alliance.⁸¹¹ However, there is a profound tension between these two political traditions since liberalism has often expressed a suspicion of the masses and a scepticism towards the collective exercise of political power. Property rights rather than popular sovereignty has been the central motif of liberal political thought. Democratic practices in the sense understood here aim for a more equal distribution of political power between democratic citizens, which can be hindered by immense inequalities in the economic sphere.⁸¹²

Second, democratic practices challenge current systems of representation through a more participatory conception of politics that involves active citizens exercising public power in significant ways over the central institutions of their societies. This is based on a recognition that the function of existing representative institutions is often to obstruct and hinder democratic rule rather than to actualise it. The more robust form of democracy considered here cultivates the democratic actions of citizens over mere symbolic forms of representation through the invocation of the name of “the people” by political elites. Democracy entails more than simply formal rights and negative liberties. It consists of a striving for more immediate forms of popular control over decision-making. This is accomplished through the implementation of more direct channels of participation and tighter forms of control over elected delegates. It rests on a faith in the political capacities of ordinary citizens rather than the guardianship of elites. The precise institutional mechanisms by which more adequate forms of representation could be achieved would be the result of pragmatic trials and experimentation.

⁸¹⁰ For a classic liberal defence of such a system see John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Civil Government* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1986) 29. For a discussion of the Lockean proviso that wealth accumulation can continue only so long as there is enough left in common for others see Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1971) 165.

⁸¹¹ Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, 3–6.

⁸¹² This definition has more in common with what Constant defined as the liberty of the ancients. See Benjamin Constant, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns,” in *The Political Writings of Benjamin Constant*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 309–328, 320.

Third, democratic practices involve an ongoing resistance to the reassertion of hierarchies and undemocratic forms of power that continually threaten social relations. There is a certain inevitability of some degree of inequality and hierarchy within democratic polities. Moreover, a structure of government will always involve the creation of elites who have more power, influence and control than average democratic citizens. A basic requirement of a democratic government is that the exercise of this political power should be accompanied by forms of democratic control and accountability. Elites should be continuously patrolled through extra-electoral institutions and practices. In this way, democratic practices could be described in the oppositional sense as the exercise of political power *against* the imposition of forms of domination. The quality of a society's democracy could be measured by the degree of reversibility of power relations and the extent to which ordinary citizens felt that they could exercise substantive forms of control over their government and political institutions.

A second general implication raised by the example of the councils is the question of what would be an effective strategy of political transformation under current conditions. How can we mobilise political collectives and reform economic and political institutions to bring about meaningful change in the interests of ordinary citizens? An examination of the practices of the councils suggests an approach that can be differentiated from the three possible alternatives of liberal reformism, new forms of left authoritarianism and neo-anarchist anti-state political movements. For liberal reformists, the traditional values of democracy can be advanced within the basic framework of a liberal state through a series of minor institutional reforms.⁸¹³ There are a variety of new democratic innovations that have attracted increased attention over the past two decades such as mini-publics, deliberative innovations, citizens' assemblies, co-governance schemes and participatory budgeting.⁸¹⁴ While each innovation is accompanied by its own particular set of advantages and limitations, many of these new institutions are short-term, small-scale, often temporary devices that fail to address the deeper structural problems of inequalities of political power between citizens.⁸¹⁵

A second approach is offered by contemporary Marxists, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, who call for the seizure of state power to be utilised for communist ends. Badiou and Žižek were

⁸¹³ Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (eds.), *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (London: Verso, 2003).

⁸¹⁴ For an overview see Graham Smith, *Beyond the Ballot: 57 Democratic Innovations from Around the World* (London: Short Run Press, 2005).

⁸¹⁵ Pateman, "Participatory Democracy Revisited," 8–10.

the two most prominent figures in a series of well-attended events, beginning in London in 2009, around the idea of communism and its revival.⁸¹⁶ Žižek advocates for a radical political act in which the Left would traverse its revolutionary fantasies and enact a total revolutionary overhaul of existing society.⁸¹⁷ This act would suspend the ordinary operation of democratic politics and replace it with an entirely different social composition based on a new political decision. There are good reasons to be critical of Žižek's open support for dictatorial methods aimed at reshaping society in the Left's image. Although it is difficult to know Žižek's precise political position, in the past decade he has called for a violent revolutionary act and advocated forms of terror, dictatorship and vanguard politics.⁸¹⁸

Third, there is growing support for a neo-anarchist ideology that is expressed through a spontaneous and disruptive form of anti-statist politics.⁸¹⁹ Many commentators noted the strong anarchist influence behind contemporary political movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Spanish *Indignados*.⁸²⁰ Neo-anarchist political actors privilege local and autonomous forms of political action that struggle against the state and operate outside of its central institutions and structures. The final goal for this vision of politics is a utopian ideal of a non-state society in which voluntary collectives organise their lives without the use of the police, army or other coercive apparatuses. The problem with some of these anarchist political projects is that they evade the central political terrain of state power and thus fail to address how systematic forms of oppression that occur within these institutions could be addressed.

The preceding history suggests that attempts at democratic transformation must engage with current institutions, both to defend gains already made and to extend them in new emancipatory directions. But would this mean resigning ourselves to the limits of liberal parliamentary institutions and to the currently dominant minimalist conception of democracy? Without the horizon of a fully emancipated society are we in some way committed to a defence of the status quo? The challenge posed by the councils, I suggest, is how to begin from the reality of present institutions and transform them through eliciting the energies and capabilities of democratic citizens. In considering these questions, it is important not to

⁸¹⁶ Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism* (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

⁸¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008).

⁸¹⁸ See Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto, 2004) 83–104.

⁸¹⁹ Duane Rouselle and Sureyya Evren (eds.), *Post-Anarchism: A Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2011); Jacob Blumenfeld, Chiara Bottici and Simon Critchley (eds.), *The Anarchist Turn* (London: Pluto Press, 2013); Nathan Jun, *Anarchism and Political Modernity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012).

⁸²⁰ David Graeber, "Occupy Wall Street's Anarchist Roots," *Al Jazeera*, 30 November 2011.

underestimate the considerable barriers that capitalist modes of production and state power pose to the pursuit of democratic ideals. However, political reform is best conceptualised as an ongoing practice rather than a radical discontinuity and rupture. The dominant institutional framework of representative democracy must be engaged with rather than dismissed or ignored. Ultimately, there is no telling whether this would end in the reorganisation of institutions into new political forms beyond recognition from the perspective of the old order. This study of the council system draws attention to the historical context in which politics occurs. Progressive changes are always the result of difficult struggles and their outcomes are not certain. They are in constant danger of being wound back by anti-democratic forces intent on reasserting the control of market forces, political hierarchies and elite rule. An examination of the councils' practices provides an exemplary account of the conditions under which democratic action takes place. It treats an example in which agents respond to specifically modern forms of domination. The councils engaged in a radical reformism that sought concrete political objectives as a means of opening the path to deeper structural changes. It is on the basis of a renewed commitment to equalising power relations between citizens and attempting to control political and economic elites that the legacy of the councils can be advanced in contemporary democratic societies.

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